



薬屋のひとりごと

Kusuriya no Hitorigoto 4

4

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日向夏
illustration
しのとうこ

Kusuriya no Hitorigoto

– The Pharmacist's Monologue –

**- Volume 4 -
Town 1**

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[Creative Novels]

Chapter 1

Locust

Vocabulary changes have been made. They are as follow:

Prostitution quarter > Pleasure district (red-light district doesn't sound quaint enough); Prostitute > Courtesan; Court Lady > Palace Lady; Imperial Court lady > Court lady; Four Consorts > Four Madames; Medical Officer > Court Physician

Mornings in the pleasure district are slow.

The caged birds that had chirped up until dawn, upon the guests leaving, strip off their masks of civility.

In the short time until the sun rises, they sleep like their strings are cut.

Maomao came out of her dilapidated shack yawning. She could see steam trailing out from the Rokushoukan before her eyes. The manservants must be working hard preparing the morning baths.

The cold air stung her skin. The air she breathed out was white. The sun was slow to rise – it was still cold with just a padded blanket.

It was when it became quiet after the new year celebrations, one month after she left the inner palace.

As her dad has entered court as a court physician, Maomao is once again back in the pleasure district.

A child is still sound asleep inside the dilapidated shack. He will be noisy once he wakes up so let's have him sleep a little while longer.

The name of the child is Chou'u. Though a survivor of the Shi Clan, Maomao is stuck with bringing him up for a certain reason.

He is a shitty brat with a good upbringing, but she wanted to appreciate his high adaptability. He had the guts to sleep through the draughty shack to the point of snoring.

(That saying, gran called me.)

While she was at it, she'll go get some hot water. You can't not take a bath in such coldness.

Maomao shivered as she went to stand before the well. She dropped the bucket in and drew up some water.

While grimacing from the icy water, she washed her face and woke up.



When she went to the Rokushoukan, the courtesans who had finished bathing were getting their hair dried by the kamuro.

"Oh, you're early today."

It was Meimei with wet hair who had called out to her. The courtesans went to bathe starting from the higher classes.

"Meimei-nee-chan, do ya know where Gran is?"

"Gran would be talking to the brothel owner over there."

"Thank ya."

The madam manages the Rokushoukan, but the owner is another person. He comes about once every month and discusses with the crone about the this and that of the brothel. He is a middle-aged man, someone the crone had known since he was small, so he cannot stand up against her.

Rumours were that he is the son of the previous owner and the crone, but the truth is, no one knows.

It seems he also runs a normal respectable business aside from managing the brothel, so he looks like a very normal good person at a glance.

In truth, his personality makes people worry if he can cross over with the times. He is a sucker to the extent that the management of this brothel will become a worry after the madam passes.

“I betcha he’s come to propose some strange idea or something again.”

“Who knows? We’ll see.”

It was the moment Meimei spread her hands.

“Ya fool! The hell did ya do!”

The madam’s voice burst out from the inside of the building.

Maomao and Meimei exchanged glances.

“It seems to be the case.”

“Seems so.”

The two looked at each other, wondering what he did this time.

A little while later, the crone came out from inside. A middle-aged man with gentle eyes followed after her. Everyone in the Rokushoukan called him Okan-san(お館さん, the same *kan* as in the *Rokushoukan*. A polite way of calling him something like Mr Establishment.). If they don’t call him such, they will probably forget that he is the owner of this establishment. Seeing how Okan-san was rubbing the crown of his head, he must have taken a fist.

“Oh, Maomao, you’re here?”

“Didn’t Gran call me?”

“So I did.”

(You senile, hag?)

She had meant to say it in her mind, but the next moment a fist sank into the crown of Maomao’s head.

Okan-san looked at Maomao with eyes of pity. When she got a sense of déjà vu of the quack doctor from the inner palace, Maomao thought, after all this time, that it must be because he looked like this old man.

She got suspicious at times that the crone is like an ayakashi, being able to read people's minds.

"For now, seeing how it is, ya must want to take a bath? Why don't ya come in for breakfast as well? Bring that sonny with you too."

"You're quite generous."

"Even *I* have times like this occasionally."

Saying that, the crone briskly headed for the kitchen.

Okan-san said "Well, then," and departed in haste. Normally he would have the spare time for breakfast, Maomao thought as she lowered her head and sent him off.



"..."

Everyone assembled in the dining room was lost for words.

It is often that everyone is divided into several times and ate together in the Rokushoukan. Maomao had figured that she was allowed to mix with this time's group.

"This is the worst."

Pairin-nee-chan sitting next to her said as she screwed her face. She is known as one of the three flowers that bloom in the Rokushoukan, but if her patrons ever see this face of hers, they will be guaranteed to be disillusioned.

She was making that kind of face.

As for Maomao, it would be the moment she finds mosquito larvae hatching in a puddle, that kind of face.

There was twenty people's worth of bowls filled with congee, soup, and small bowls on the table, as well as three imposingly large platters set up with equal distance between them.

It is standard in the Rokushoukan to have one rice, one soup, and usually one side dish. The small bowl had namasu today. And additionally, as there were the large platters, two side dishes would normally be considered a very extravagant breakfast.

The certain thing in the large plates had a black lustre. The thing that is normally treated as a harmful insect that lays waste to crops, is being served on the table as a side dish.

It is locust.

“Gran, this is?”

“Shut up and eat. It’s a souvenir from Okan-san.”

She figured out why the madam was angry, Okan-san had work aside from managing the brothel. Officially, he lives respectfully under the sun as the owner of a large store. However, she can’t say that his business method is good.

“There’s poor crop this year. It seems he got thrown into people’s mercy.”

The crone said in irritation as she drizzled black vinegar on her congee.

Okan-san deals with grain in his business. Produce is collected in the form of tax from the farmers in this country, moreover, the country buys up a fixed portion. The ones that distribute the rest is Okan-san’s business.

“Even so, what was he doing buying this at his business partner’s asking price. It’s something that won’t sell well even at the best of times. And there’s so much this year.”

On the platters were crisply fried locust simmered in sauce and sugar.

“It’ll be waste if ya buy too much and can’t preserve it. If ya hafta go as far as to use sugar, ya might as well just chuck it out.”

Sugar is a high-class item. Even if you simmer it in plenty of sugar, as if there would be anyone who would eat simmered insects.

As expected, there was a large amount left unsold, and thus it is being served on the

dining table of the Rokushoukan.

It seems Okan-san even tried self-consumption, but he also had his own circumstances. He had a wife who wasn't feeling pleased about his business.

In any case, if there was his wife getting angry at him, he must have preferred the madam's fist.

Maomao scratched the back of her head. She was used to eating strange things, but she didn't want to start on this huge pile of insects. Even eating two or three, she wanted to put her hands together.

The courtesans, as they hated strange things more than Maomao, scrunched up their faces and none of them started either.

"Hurry up and eat! It's the side dish you guys have been yapping about. Eat five per person."

As the madam spoke in irritation, the very first pair of chopsticks went for the large plate.

(Oh?)

It was an unexpected person who ate it first.

Unfazed, he crunched on the insect with an ominous look.

"This, is not tasty at all. It's kinda hollow."

It was Chou'u who was eating as he gave his honest opinion.

She was sure that, with his young master upbringing, he would be opposed to putting this sort of thing in his mouth, but it didn't seem to be the case.

Did he lose that mien because he lost his memories? Or has he eaten this before? Or could it be the adaptability of a child?

"You can eat well, don't you."

Pairin said, inserting herself between Maomao.

“It’s not delicious but it’s not like it’s inedible. It’s just extremely hollow.”

(Hollow?)

If she was not mistaken, the locust innards are removed before it is cooked, so it being hollow is a given. *So it’s something like this*, Maomao thought as she half-heartedly picked up a locust.

(Mn!?)

It really is hollow. Rather than the hollow texture when she had eaten it before, it felt more like that there were no insides. Even though it was simmered in soy sauce, that feeling must be because there is only the texture of the exoskeleton in her mouth.

Not that it has meat, she felt that it was more that it didn’t have any in the first place.

“Hey hey, why don’t you have me eat for you? You can trade me one mooncake.”

She seized Chou’u’s head, who was offering a negotiation with Pairin, and pressed down firmly. “Ow, owowowow,” Chou’u groaned.

Maomao picked up a locust with her chopsticks and studied it intently.

It was her usual bad habit.

Once she gets interested in it, that would be all she thinks about.



“Oh yeah, I was thinking of getting ya to go shopping.”

After breakfast, the madam finally remembered why she had summoned Maomao. It was to go shopping at the market that is set up in the central road of the town.

The courtesans cannot leave the brothel and the manservants were not smart. The market has a lot of unusual goods, but there aren’t few of those fellows that rip people off. As they don’t set up shop, they should sell with cheap prices, but there aren’t few bad guys that don’t put up signboards. You need a good sense of judgement to buy good items.

“I want ya to go buy incense. The usual one.”

It is the incense that burns with the usual faint aroma at the entrance of the Rokushoukan. Since it's a consumable, she would want it as cheap as possible, but something of poor quality was out of the question.

“Kay. And the reward?”

When Maomao put out her hand, it was slapped away.

“Two person's worth of morning baths and breakfast. Ain't that first-class?”

Stingy hag, Maomao thought.



“Heeyyy, freckles. Buy that.”

“No way.”

Maomao ignored Chou'u who was pulling her sleeve and pointing to the open-air toy store. She honestly wanted to go alone, but she had no choice but to bring this shitty brat along as he threw a tantrum, rolling on the ground, saying that he wanted to follow.

Maomao took Chou'u's hand, and walked while dragging him along.

The market is set up daily on the large stretch of road in the centre of the capital. Amid the coming and going of horse-drawn carriages, beyond there is the place where the people of the heavens resided.

Seeing it like this, she ended up wondering whether the time she worked at that place was a dream or something. However, Chou'u next to her signified that she had been in the imperial court and thus had also been involved in that incident.

The uprising of the Shi Clan. It seems it more or less also had an effect on the market.

A lot of the special products from the northern regions are types of grain and wooden goods, but she felt that there were less of these products than usual in the shops. Instead, the dried fruit and textile shops common from the southern and western

regions caught her eye.

And then, Maomao made an unpleasant face when she came across a certain thing.

They were selling simmered insects.

Locust again.

“That, is absolutely bad. Would anyone buy this?”

Chou’u had said it in front of a shop, so Maomao clamped his mouth shut and dragged him away. Honestly, the food cart shopkeeper’s eyes were scary.

Maomao finally released Chou’u in a place a fair distance away.

“What was that? Isn’t it true that it’s bad?”

“Shut up.”

Maomao looked at Chou’u coldly. *That’s why I really hate children*, she thought deeply.

“Insects with that hollow shape is bad. This year’s produce is already no good.”

“...just then, what did you say?”

Maomao blinked incessantly.

“Ah, that it’s absolutely bad?”

“No, not that. What you said after.”

“That this year’s produce is already no good?”

(What was that?)

Maomao stared at Chou’u.

“How did you know *that*?”

“Ummm, what was that again—“

Chou'u roughly scratched his head with his right hand. His left hand is slightly cramped, so it hung limply by his side.

Chou'u had died once, having drunk the resurrection drug, and somehow came back to life afterwards. Because of that, his body is still numb, and he had lost most of his memories.

"I can't remember well. It's just, I feel that I heard that when insects become hollow, there'll be crop failure."

Ummm, Chou'u clutched his head.

He might recall something if I shake his head, Maomao thought, but she can't treat him anymore slovenly as he is pretty much in her custody.

However, if what Chou'u said is true, then there will be quite a serious issue, Maomao thought.

"Perhaps, I might be able to remember."

"Really?"

Maomao replied, and Chou'u looked towards the food cart. The toy shop was over there.

"If you buy something, I might be able to remember."

"..."

For now, she wrenched his mouth wide open.

Chapter 2

Chou'u

The shitty brat is undoubtedly a shitty brat.
Maomao really thought.

(He might be able to remember something.)

Chou'u was moving a brush gleefully while nursing a lump on his head. Unexpectedly, what this shitty brat had wanted wasn't toys, but rather, stationery.

As paper had been surprisingly expensive, the brush was what Maomao had given him. Perhaps with him originally from a good place, he could tell apart the high-quality goods from the low-quality ones in the paper store. After saying this is no good, and that is no good either, he had settled on wanting the best and most expensive item in the store.

Of course, Maomao wouldn't allow such luxury, so he picked the one that was usable, no matter how inferior the quality was, and bought that.

Paper is expensive as a consumable, but its price isn't unaffordable. Every time she would think that it would go cheaper if it is circulated more.

She looked at Chou'u who was carrying the bundle of papers gleefully, and decided to excuse him from a fist for now.

As soon as they returned to the Rokushoukan, without preamble, Chou'u was drawing something enthusiastically. As for Maomao, she was busy with the order of abortion drug and cold medicine. Chou'u asked the courtesans who were grinding tea and the *kamuro* who were close to his age to not commit any mischief today and secluded himself inside the pharmacy.

It was when she was back after leaving to deliver the ordered medicine to another brothel.

(What is it?)

There was a crowd at the entrance. There were courtesans and kamuro gathered there – even manservants, surprisingly enough.

As she wondered what was up, she strained her eyes. And right in the middle of it all was the cheeky brat.

What did you do? Maomao hurried over to Chou'u. She broke through the crowd to stand before the shitty brat. And there, on the white paper was dancing elegant lines.

“What is it, Freckles? Wait in line.”

“What are you doing?”

Chou'u was drawing. He had the paper set on a flat board as a makeshift table. A courtesan was sitting demurely on a chair in front of him.

“What, you say. I'm drawing pictures.”

He drew, gliding the brush forward. And there was a beauty that was the courtesan before his eyes with a little colour.

“Okayy, I'm done.”

Chou'u placed the brush flat across the ink pot and fluttered the paper. The model courtesan's demure expression transformed into a smile. “Oh my,” she said as she took out her wallet from her bosom.

“Thanks for your patronage—”

He received not coins but five beautiful notes of money and put it in his breast pocket. That amount is too much for a brat's pocket money.

“I'm next.”

A manservant sat on the chair. Could he be messing about without keeping watch? He's going to be punished if the madam finds him.

“Ah, sorry big bro. I'm out of paper. I'll go buy some more in a bit, so we'll do this

tomorrow.”

“What— I’ve been waiting forever you know!”

“I’m sorry. I’ll start with the men first tomorrow alright.”

He was quite used to it.

After saying that, he scampered away, heading back towards the paper store again.

She was pretty sure that he bought ten sheets. Does that mean that he’s already out of that?

It seems that it was only the three people here that he drew portraits for. To think that he got funds from just that.

(To think he had such a special skill.)

Maomao roughly scratched the back of her head as she studied the portrait.

“Ya’ll! What are ya doing!”

When they heard the hoarse screeching of the crone, all the faces, which had been amicable until now, paled.

“Hurry up and set up shop, the guests are going to leave.”

Since it was the crone who said it while waving about a bamboo cane, the courtesans, kamuro, and manservants all scattered away like spiderlings.

Just as Maomao was also going to hurry back to her place, her shoulder was firmly gripped by a boney hand.

“What is it, gran?”

“It’s not *what is it*. That brat. No matter how much child-rearing expenses you get, you can’t just spoil him.”

“Ain’t it gran who’s wangling the money?”

For some reason, the crone is the one who is keeping the money she received. To a certain extent, Chou'u doing as he pleased in the Rokushoukan is related to that part. However, although he is a child, men cannot reside in the brothel and he can't be stuffed into the row houses where the manservants resided, so in the end, he went to live in Maomao's dilapidated shack.

"I don't get the rental fee for the space."

(Greedy hag.)

She hadn't intended to say it out loud, but mysteriously, the crone's fist fell upon Maomao's head.

"Come on, ya have to pack up that brush and ink pot."

"Why?"

"If ya don't shut up and do it, it'll be locust broth for ya today."

(This hag.)

Maomao reluctantly started to pack up the inkpot as she clutched her head.



Come evening, Maomao looked at the dissatisfied expression of Chou'u who had returned to the shack.

Could Chou'u have borrowed a brush from somewhere? He was carrying a bundle of papers that had been scribbled on.

"Freckles, where did the brush go?"

"I'm not giving it anymore to the guy who doesn't tidy up after himself."

She turned her back on him in a huff and added firewood to the kitchen range. Maomao was wearing a blanket. The moment the sun set, it suddenly got cold.

"Don't be stingy."

“Assign the stingy to the madam.”

Maomao stirred the clay pot. She scooped at the congee and tasted it. It was a little bland so she added some salt.

“Gran said that she’ll be collecting a rental fee.”

“I get it. I’ll go somewhere else next time.”

Hearing his words, Maomao knitted her brows. She plunged the ladle into the clay pot, set that on the woven mat, and stood before Chou’u was making himself at home. She bent forward and stared at Chou’u.

“What?”

“Even if you don’t pay the rental fee, it must be only in the surroundings of the Rokushoukan. You can’t go to places far from the manservants. Also, you can’t go buy paper alone.”

“Isn’t that sorta thing up to me?”

Chou’u turned his face away in a huff and Maomao seized his head. She forced him to face her.

“If you want to be a lump of meat, then, by all means, do whatever you want.”

“Lump of meat?”

She glared. The words “lump of meat” weren’t a joke. The Rokushoukan may be a peaceful, but here is the pleasure district. A place where the face and reverse side of the capital are, by nature, jumbled together.

Maomao furtively gestured to the window of the shack. She pointed from the gap of the badly fitted door.

“You’ll be involved with that kind.”

From the gap, there was an isolated light in the dusk.

Clothes up to her head, she was holding a lantern and woven mat in her hands. At a glance, she looked like a normal woman, but-

“!?”

With a clank, Chou’u rose up.

He should be able to see it from a distance. The face of a streetwalker with a missing nose. The worst class prostitute, who lacks decent lodging and can only take in customers from the roadside, due to a type of venereal disease, has her body worn out in various places. There was no way she could keep at it for long with that, but she still needed to take men to earn her meal expenses for today.

It must her dad’s merciful heart that they settled down in these parts. Something bothersome had turned up, Maomao thought.

“Here isn’t a clean place. If there is a brat with money, there will be many guys who are going to steal it even if it means killing you.”

Listen to me if you don’t want to die, she said.

Chou’u pursed his lips. Eyes slightly teary, he nodded.

“I get it. I’ll eat quickly then sleep.”

He said that and Maomao moved to the front of the stove. She stirred the congee again.



The next morning, when Maomao awoke, Chou’u was already up.

There was some rustling sound, and when she looked, there were papers strewn about the table. Chou’u was fervently moving the brush.

(Did that brat just...)

Maomao got up to drop a fist. As she did so, a sheet of paper with something drawn on it fell from the table.

(Mm?)

Thinking it fishy, she picked it up.

There was a detailed picture of an insect drawn on it.

It was drawn really realistically. Looking at it was almost enough to make her feel gross.

(Reminds me of her.)

Of the palace lady who liked insects, no, the girl who was a consort.

That the girl who assumed the name Shisui, had also drawn in this manner.

She got a little sad as she looked at it.

“Done—“

Chou’u suddenly got up.

He went before Maomao with a sheet of paper in his hand.

“Freckles, I’ve done it.”

“What did you do?”

“This. It’s this.”

He displayed the paper close to her face.

There were two insects – locusts – drawn there. Both of them were locusts, but their forms were slightly different.

“I can’t remember properly, but I have a feeling it’s something like this. I think I saw this with the talk on crop failure.”

He spoke vaguely, but his drawings were extremely clear.

“This is the locust during normal times. Underneath is the locust when there is crop

failure.”

“Is that true?”

“I think so. It’s just bits and pieces though.”

Chou’u has lost his memories. But could he be in the process of regaining bits and pieces of his memory? If so, there will be a whole lot of inconveniences, but on the other hand, there was another thing that was more important.

Two kinds of locusts.

I need to study more about this, Maomao thought.



There is a thing called locust plague.

It is one of the natural disasters that ruin the country, where a large swarm of insects eat up all the crops.

There is great crop damage from insects every year, but there is no comparison in the case of the locust plague. Locusts eat up every and all things. It is said that in bad years, they will go as far as to even eat grass sandals and straw ropes.

Though she had no idea what kind of pattern it would occur in, it happens every couple of years. Besides, it hasn’t occurred since the current emperor came to reign.

The current emperor’s reign is splendid, therefore the heavens won’t let the locust plague happen, is something that is not possible, Maomao thought. At any rate, wouldn’t it be more likely that it hasn’t come yet?

If that’s the case, just having the first locust plague occur in this era would be a chance to test the emperor’s power. The other day, they had only just punished the Shi Clan that had consolidated the most power in this country.

The timing is bad.

If the locust plague occurs, people could take the punishment of the Shi Clan as heaven’s punishment.

(Yeah, it's not related, not related.)

Though that was what she had been intending to do, Maomao found herself heading off to the bookstore in town.

(I doubt they have anything though.)

She recalled seeing Chou'u's detailed picture.

She was sure that she had seen that sort of picture before.

Maomao entered the shop among the rows of shops that had books lined up in detail.

When the bell jingled, the owner who looked like an ornament gave a light greeting from the interior. That was the limits of his courtesy, as he returned to his posture where it wasn't clear whether he went back to sleep or not.

The books inside were generally books for loan or second hand. He also sold new items, but as books are high-class items, you had to order them otherwise they rarely come out.

(I guess there's no way there would be any.)

The books here were generally all popular fiction or otherwise things that are, so to speak, vulgar, pornographic prints. Still, occasionally there would be lucky finds so she came to have a look but...

"..."

Maomao rubbed her eyes.

What is with this convenience?

She reflexively pulled her cheeks.

"Uncle, can I look at this for a bit?"

Maomao pointed to the stack of books on the shop owner's table.

"Ahh, Ahhhhh."

Maomao took that indescribable response as an affirmative and picked up that book.

The book was thick. It had a drawing of a bird on the cover.

(This has to be a lie.)

No, it wasn't possible. But it was actually possible.

The book had lots of illustrations of birds and explanations, as well as written notes here and there.

"What's up with this?"

"Mmm—, this came in to be sold yesterday."

It was an apathetic response.

"Are there other ones that had come in to be sold?"

"There is only one volume for this. Though, he said he'll come again."

Maomao's face lit up.

This was the second time this book fell into Maomao's hands.

That's right. It was the exact same book she saw from that time.

From the room she was confined in after Shisui brought her along for the short while. This was one of the volumes of the books she found there.

Chapter 3

Ukyou

Why is such a thing, Maomao thought.

She was pretty sure that Shishou's fortress had been sealed up after that. It was strange to have something from that place here. Even if the things in the fortress had been moved, to have it appear on the market in the city meant that it had been smuggled in.

(Mm—)

If it's like that.

Maomao had an idea too.



The perpetrator was soon found in two days.

Speaking of how he was found, it was easy.

“Don't just go right ahead and call me for this sort of thing, lass.”

It was Rihaku who was speaking with annoyance. While he was saying that, he was restlessly looking inside the Rokushoukan.

They were inside the pharmacy that Maomao operated. He had to shrink down his large body to get into the confined shop.

“I don't have the free time to go after a sneak thief either, you know.”

While he was saying that, he glanced up the ceiling of the stairwell and searched for the face of the flower on the upper floor.

Rihaku, a military officer she is acquainted with, had fallen for Pairin, one of the Three Princess of this Rokushoukan. However, even visiting the brothel required money. And so, if it was Maomao's favour, who is on good terms with Pairin, he would be accommodating to whatever she tells him.

She wanted to him to stand watch since the stolen goods – the archive ransacked – might appear in town.

That was what she requested.

Speaking of unusual stolen goods like illustrated books, it can be easily traced from the point of sale. Just in case, as there was also the possibility of them being disposed in shops aside from that bookstore, she left it to Rihaku just like so.

"Fufu, be grateful that I have been keeping watch since morning."

"So you didn't call your subordinates."

Did he want to show his extremely good side? It seems he worked hard himself. To be on a lookout in the still cold season, that was appreciative of his efforts.

Rihaku passed the package in his hands to Maomao. It looks to be a gift of dango. Then he glanced at the stairwell again.

Drink tea with everyone, then call for Pairin to come, could that be what he means?

However, there was one thing to do before that.

"So, what about the criminal?"

"If it's about him, he's outside. I got your place's manservants to look after him for us."

"Is that so?"

Maomao looked out the window.

There was a skinny, seedy looking man being surrounded by two manservants. Rashes on his face, a man certainly with that appearance.

(Huh?)

“Oi.”

Ignoring Rihaku’s voice, Maomao put on her shoes. She headed for the manservants.

The criminal that was being surrounded by the two brawny manservants appeared smaller than he looked.

“It ain’t safe. Don’t come any closer.”

The senior manservant said, grabbing Maomao by her collar.

It was unpleasant to be being treated like a cat, but there was nothing she could do since that was how it was ever since she was young. Maomao regarded the criminal in that posture.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The criminal and her eyes met.

She had thought it was rashes, but it looked like he got an irritation from something. Though mostly healed, it was still conspicuous.

The criminal stared at Maomao’s face. And then he paled.

And then, considering what he was going to say...

“Poison maiden!”

Spittle flying, he said.

Maomao narrowed her eyes. The two manservants looked at one another and burst into laughter.

(This guy is...)

On top of not remembering people’s faces well, she wasn’t sure with his face covered in rashes, but if she remembered properly, this man was the man from the fortress. The man who Maomao had smeared lacquer on his face, who fainted when his crotch got stomped on.

(I seeeee.)

So it's something like that, Maomao realised.

This means that he is one of the people who escaped from that fortress during the confusion.

Maomao crossed her arms and thought for a short while.

“What’s wrong, lass?”

Rihaku showed up and glared at the criminal.

The criminal blatantly shuddered.

(Hm.)

I can use this, Maomao thought.

“My apologies. I know this guy.”

Maomao declared it indifferently, then grinned at the criminal.



Rihaku looked like he thought that Maomao’s behaviour was slightly strange, but the moment Maomao carried tea snacks and called Pairin, he left with his tail wagging.

And so now in Maomao’s pharmacy was Maomao, the criminal in question, and...

“Old man, it’s fine to not watch.”

Maomao looked at the senior manservant in annoyance. As everyone was in the middle of starting tea, it was only this man who went to Maomao. Shrewdly, he was holding dango in his hands.

“That can’t do. The Fox-dono and the Mask-dono will get angry if there are strange bugs.”

The fox would be the monocle tactician, and the mask would have to be Jinshi. The man still has plenty of value despite his face being damaged goods. On top of his mere appearance being eye-catching enough as it is, it must be all the more considering his position.

It shouldn't be good for that which is the imperial brother to loiter in the pleasure district. However, he is a whimsical who comes here every ten days.

"Whaaaat, I'm keeping silent and eating dango only. I won't hear anyyyything."

said he, leaning against the wall.

He is reaching his forties and had been here before Maomao was born.

His name is Ukyou(右叫, You Jiao), a man who handled anything flawlessly. In any case, the madam must have told him. He said he won't hear, but it is a given that he will tell if the madam asks of it.

If it comes to that, she could only talk to the part where she wouldn't be troubled even if the madam asks of it.

(No problems even if it's leaked huh.)

Maomao thought as she watched the man sitting before her. There were two volumes set out on the wooden floor. It is what Maomao had found in the bookstore and what this man came to sell today.

"What happened to the other books?"

At Maomao's question, the man turned his face away in a huff. It is a somewhat understandable reaction, but honestly, he didn't have that liberty.

If he sold it elsewhere, there is the possibility that it will be bought by another person.

Maomao slapped the floor.

"The military officer over there, he is related to the suppression of that fortress. Will you be okay with me telling him that you were in that place?"

Maomao said slowly in a low voice.

The man's complexion got worse. Seeing that his face rashes were still pitiful, Maomao felt a little guilty, but she didn't really regret it since there was no way for her to make

an allowance for the other person who escaped from that place.

Ukyou mindlessly stuffed his cheeks with dango and chewed slowly.

The man bent his lips and lowered his head in resignation.

“I still have three volumes on hand. I sold two volumes in another district, I didn’t bring the rest with me.”

If the fire didn’t spread to that room from the gunpowder explosion, the rest of the books might be retrieved.

In that case, the issue is the remaining two volumes that were sold.

The bird and fish illustrated books were in her hands.

“Did you sell the insect illustrated book?”

“No, I have one volume on hand.”

(One volume?)

Hm, Maomao twisted her neck. There were numbers allocated to the bird illustrated book. If there was one labelled “One”, there would be bound to be a “Two”.

“Can you bring that illustrated book as soon as possible?”

“Can you promise me that you won’t turn me over?”

“That will depend on your attitude.”

In response to Maomao who spoke overbearingly, Ukyou, who had been standing on the side the whole time, sighed deeply.

“Oi oi, Maomao. That’ll make it not much different to a threat.”

After he said that, Ukyou sat down on the wooden floors of the cramped pharmacy, and slapped the man’s shoulders.

“Hey, you hungry? There seems to be some reason, so you should relax a little.”

“ .. ”

The man said nothing, but Ukyou went silent and left the pharmacy. Soon after he returned with a tray with a bowl full of rice and side dish.

The side dish was nothing other than the remainders of the simmered locust, but when the man was presented with chopsticks from Ukyou, he devoured the bowl with no hesitation.

Maomao was shocked by his vigour.

“ .. ”

“You still have a way to go.”

Ukyou slapped Maomao’s shoulders. The man who was busy eating took no notice of them.

Uykou said in a whisper.

“Seeing the state of him, various things must have happened before he came to the capital? Even if he said that he sold the books, it couldn’t be helped to lose the means to make his livelihood surely. He handled the actual books carefully. So I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

“Is that so.”

Maomao’s first impression of him was *that* so she couldn’t say anything.

“You have to master the carrot and stick well.”

“I knooooow.”

If the madam is the stick of the Rokushoukan, the head manservant would have to be the carrot. The old man wasn’t tall nor was his face good, but him being popular with the courtesans must be from this.

“Mm? What is it?”

The unkempt man who was eating ravenously, his hand had stopped. Ukyou looked with his head tilted.

“Disgusting.”

“You hate locust?”

“This ain’t locust.”

The man said as he picked up a locust with his chopsticks.

“Ain’t that locust?”

“These guys may be if you put them together, but the farmers call them differently.”

“How so?”

Maomao and Ukyou peered at the man. The man picked at the pile of simmered insects, bit at them one by one and sorted them out.

Split into two piles, the ratio would have to be around one to eight.

“This is locust. It is what the farmers simmer and eat. This is grasshopper. They look similar, but this one is disgusting.”

“Are their tastes really that different?”

Ukyou returned.

Honestly, she didn’t know that grasshoppers and locust have that kind of difference. Maomao had put them together without thinking hard on it.

“You’ll know when you eat it. When the legs are chopped up finely and you boil them, you won’t even tell the colouring, so the guys with terrible character sell them to unsuspecting merchants. That’s why you think that locusts are disgusting.”

So that’s how it is. There is no doubt that Okan-san is a good business partner. Locust one part, grasshopper eight parts. No wonder it was disgusting.

Maomao reached out for the locust and put it in her mouth. Certainly, she felt that this

side had meat and was tastier.

The man made a serious look and stared at the grasshoppers.

“If you got something to say, say it.”

Instead of Maomao, Ukyou asked.

“There might be famine this year.”

At those words, Maomao drew close to the man.

“Is that really true?”

“I, I don’t have proof. It’s just that when the numbers of grasshoppers are a lot greater than locusts, the insect damage will be horrible the year after.”

Considering the ratio of grasshoppers and locusts, it should be sufficient.

Maomao stared at the man.

“Speaking of which, do you know much about that? Though it had insects, I thought that most of the other things aside from the books can be sold in that room.”

He might not have emotionally wanted to take the lacquerware, but a normal guy would choose something that would sell easier than books.

The man scratched the back of his head with a little embarrassment.

“...I really didn’t want to sell the illustrated books.”

“Didn’t you tell the bookstore owner that you would come to sell more later?”

“For that, wouldn’t they buy it high for courtesy? Besides, I was going to buy it back when I have the allowance. It’s not like there are people who like illustrated books and would buy it.”

No, let’s not mention that there is one here.

Honestly, the man only had the clothes on his back. It was fine since it was still winter, but she was honestly against him coming into the pharmacy with the grime on his face.

“The elderly man who lived in that room before in that fortress. I was the one who brought in his meals.”

Maomao widened her eyes at the unexpected talk.

“Though he was brought in to make new medicine or whatever it was, he also researched on various other things, you know.”

“Like what?”

“That would be, this.”

He indicated the grasshoppers.

“What can we do to prevent the locust plague?”

He studied that, the man said.

Maomao gulped.

And it was the moment she opened her mouth to ask the man.

The door of the pharmacy was opened with a loud bang.

“Freckles! Can I eat your dango!”

Chou’u showed up with dango in both hands.

The man blinked in surprise.

“Huh? Young Mas...”

As he was going to call out to him, the man’s mouth was gapped stupidly. Maomao grabbed some mashed medicinal herbs nearby and crammed it in his mouth.

“Bitter!”

She was sorry that he was suffering, but he was going to speak of something very ominous, so it can't be helped.

Since the Shi Clan should have been exterminated in the eyes of society.

Chou'u watched the man who was rolling on the floor in amusement.

"I'll give you the dango, so don't come in."

"What is this, shoo, you say. I'm not a dog or a cat."

Chou'u didn't seem to recognise the man. He naturally ignored him.

"Chou'u, shall this old chap give you a piggy back?"

"Eh, can you, old man? Do it, do it—"

While feeling grateful towards Ukyou who skilfully sidestepped the boy's condition, Maomao bent her fingers and counted.

(I don't have proof though.)

It was better to get a heads-up just in case.

She counted how many days left until Jinshi comes.

T/N: In this case, Locust refers to locusts in the solitary phase, 蝗(いなご), and Grasshopper the locusts in the gregarious phase, 飛蝗(バッタ). (I know the names are the opposite of how they are referred to in English.) But don't worry, the novel will later refer to both of them as grasshoppers... They are both locusts, just in different physiological forms.

Chapter 4

Sleep

It was three days later since then, the time the sun was crossing the meridian, when the masked noble finally appeared in the pharmacy.

“Welcome!”

It was Jinshi who shuddered at Maomao’s jovial greeting. Gaoshun was behind him, his mouth gaped stupidly as if to say what happened.

“O-oi, what is it?”

“Shaomao, this here now is Jinshi-sama. Could you have mistaken him for someone else?”

Maomao got offended. What’s with that reaction? When Gaoshun gave the slip of his tongue, he glanced at Jinshi, and Jinshi returned him a fishy look from the gap of his mask.

When Jinshi entered the pharmacy, he sat on the senbei zabuton^[note]A sitting cushion that’s super large and round like a senbei/rice cracker.^[/note]. As the interior is very cramped, Gaoshun waited out at the entrance of the Rokushoukan per usual. She shut the sliding door and he finally removed his mask.

And there was the usual beautiful face with a single unsightly scar. The pitifulness has subsided greatly with the stitches off, but people who see it will still let out an unwilling sigh. In the meaning that it’s a waste.

The Shi Clan uprising from last year has been amusingly whipped up in town. The beautiful imperial brother and the villain, Rouran, were the stars of the story. It had been the Shi Clan head Shishou when it originally came out, but Rouran came forth to be taunted. The reason must be Jinshi’s scar.

The villainess who greatly scarred the beauty that was unbelievable for the people of

this world will be passed down from here on.

Recalling the palace lady with a sunny smile who loved insects, Maomao made a distant stare.

“Don’t you have some business?”

At Jinshi’s question, Maomao jolted.

(That’s right.)

Maomao took out the illustrated book she bought at the bookstore from the cupboard.

“What is this?”

“It appears to be something sold off by some looter who had stolen from the fortress at the scene of the fire.”

She decided to cover up about the man who escaped from the fortress. She had entrusted him to the head manservant Ukyou, so if she handed him over on her own accord, that helpful man will get angry.

They decided to call the man who had escaped from the fortress with the name Sazen[[note](#)]左膳, Zuo Shan.[/[note](#)]. Since Chou’u, the brat, might regain his memories, they had him use a false name just in case. The man, who also didn’t seem to be attached to his name, is learning the job from Ukyou.

(We recovered the portions that had been sold in the bookstores.)

Ukyou had promptly gathered them for her. It was good that his close friend, a pimp, had just gone to the district where the illustrated book was being sold. It seems they talked and bought it back for her.

In that case, the remaining issue is-

“I think the rest of these illustrated books are in the fortress. I want to collect them.”

Jinshi squinted a single eye and looked at Maomao.

“Why are you collecting that?”

In response to that question, she took out the goods and showed him.

With a thud, the rice-bowl set before Jinshi was mounted with a pile of disgusting insects that had been simmered in soy sauce.

Jinshi’s face stiffened. He shrank back.

“What the heck is this?”

“Simmered locust. It’s mostly grasshoppers_(swarming locusts) though.”

Maomao picked up one with a pair of chopsticks and thrust it towards Jinshi. He shrank back even more.

“I’m not eating!”

“I’m not telling you to do that.”

Maomao placed the grasshopper onto a plate, then took out the sheet of paper with insects drawn on it. It was the drawing of grasshopper and locust. The drawing was of before they had been simmered, but she thought he could perceive their characteristics.

“It seems there is a large outbreak of grasshoppers last year. Have you heard anything from the farmers about a locust plague?”

“...”

Jinshi’s expression clouded. He sighed deeply as he scratched his head.

“I have received that report. The damage in the farming villages in the north is great.”

However, it wasn’t to the point where there were people dying from starvation. Luckily or unluckily, this year’s autumn had been cold, so it seems the locust extermination had been easy.

“The locust damage has continued for this past couple of years. What about this year?”

Jinshi's face twisted.

Had he also predicted that situation?

The northern regions would have to be most of the Shi Clan dominion. As long as those people are gone, wouldn't it have to be the emperor who would manage that?

"For the parts with poor crop last year, there was an arrangement to rotate the emergency stores of the southern regions."

They mustn't have gotten around to what will happen afterward.

"If it occurs this year again, it will become more or less painful."

It is said that the occurrence of the locust plague is due to the emperor not reigning properly. It is insects at most, but it seems, it is historically because of that in reality, that it is the cause of its downfall.

And what would the citizens think, if that happened the year after the overthrowing of the Shi Clan?

(It's foolish superstition.)

It is not a lot of people who would end the matter with those words.

And then, it is emperor, and people with his lineage, who rules over those people as his people.

"The locust plague is something that happens naturally. It is about what we can do about it. Shall we light a bonfire and lure out the insects, or shall we crush them one by one?"

It's natural. That sort of thing will make no progress.

"That's why I'm looking for this."

Maomao presented the illustrated book before Jinshi.

It is the insect illustrated book that Sazen, the man who had escaped from the fortress, had possessed. There are written notes packed inside.

"I found another volume of the insect illustrated book at the fortress. Locusts were written in detail there."

Certainly, she had a feeling that it was written, but it was honestly just conjecture. Her eyes passed over the other descriptions, she had only flipped through the insect illustrated book. But, if Sazen had said that he didn't take it out, it could only be like so.

"The doctor that used to be in that fortress seemed to have researched locust plagues."

"Truly?"

"I don't know how far he went with it though."

She explained to him that it was probable that she needed to check.

Hm, Jinshi rubbed his chin. He opened the door and called Gaoshun over. Gaoshun immediately summoned an attendant who had been on standby outside the Rokushoukan.

"We should have it retrieved within a couple of days."

"Thank you very much."

Maomao sighed deeply.

It won't end with that, but the thing that has been spinning in her head for this past couple of days have been mentioned and resolved.

Instead, Jinshi's complexion worsened. Jinshi, who had changed from his position as a eunuch, looked tired even at the best of times.

What Maomao said, had, in the end, increased Jinshi's workload.

"Are you tired?"

"As it is. But I'm fine."

The bags under his eyes were dark. However, the officials and court ladies around him

must not recognise it as fatigue but as gloominess.

Even with his facial scar, this man's inhuman beauty is going strong, thus people will misinterpret his substance.

(At this rate, he's going to collapse.)

People who are numb to the sensation of tiredness will not understand fatigue even more. Even Gaoshun, if Jinshi said he was fine, is unable to stop him.

(He should sleep.)

If he purposely came all the way here, it would be better he took this time resting in his room.

Maomao faced Jinshi in amazement.

"Jinshi-sama, why don't you take a rest?"

"Why so suddenly?"

"I'll prepare you a bed immediately. Please sleep."

Maomao stared at Jinshi. She caught sight of the scar on his right cheek. As she observed the neat stitches, she involuntarily cast down her eyes.

The wound her dad stitched and the salve smeared on top of it, she wanted to keep staring at it. Jinshi's scar might remain, but she wanted to see it heal faster.

"Are you telling me to sleep in such a place?"

"Can you not sleep alone?"

Maomao had said it slightly jokingly. However, as expected, she was treating him too much like a child.

"It's a jok—"

"Yeah, alone is no good."

Just as she was going to correct herself, she got interrupted halfway.

It seems sleeping alone is lonely.

(I see.)

Maomao poked her head out from the pharmacy door and called the kamuro who was nearby. She got her to summon the madam for her.

“What is it?”

When she relayed the matter to an unmotivated madam, the eyes inside the wrinkly eyelids shone.

“Wait a quarter-dual-hour_(thirty minutes).”

(Can you prepare with that?)

Giving a backward glance to the randomly enthusiastic madam, Maomao held out the tea that is effective for fatigue towards Jinshi.



“It’s here.”

Maomao said, guiding Jinshi to another place.

The place she brought him is the highest floor of the Rokushoukan. The room, surrounded by the highest-grade furniture, is spread out with the full set of cushions. Since they were imbued by incense, it is filled with a sweet aroma.

“Please rest here. Work is important, but a break is also essential.”

She had thought that the madam would overcharge again, but it seems the crone had put some thought into this, she rented them the best room as it is. The madam having prepared this room in a quarter-dual-hour, is a big thing.

She might have thought that it is a better plan to give a good impression to a noble.

“If you wish to take a bath, a medicine bath has been prepared. I don’t know if the sleepwear will suit you, but please use this.”

Maomao handed over the soft cotton sleepwear.

Jinshi's look of surprise gradually shifted into a gentle smile. It wasn't the celestial maiden's smile, but the effect that bewitched both men and women is unchanged.

"I'm going to take a bath."

Jinshi headed for the connecting bathroom. The bathwater that the manservants had taken several round trips to fill up should be at the perfect temperature.

Maomao patted down her chest in relief.

Gaoshun, who was in the corner of the room, also looked like the wrinkles of his brows had eased.

However, the moment Jinshi opened the door that continued to the bathroom, he froze. Some seconds passed, and he slammed the door shut and rapidly drew towards Maomao.

"Why are there lightly dressed women in the bathroom?"

"They're pros so there's no issue."

Since he's a young master whose nanny peels mandarins for him, she didn't think he would take a bath alone. She prepared attendants just like how when the emperor takes his bath, and while she was at it, asked them to give him a massage.

"...do you hate massages?"

"Does it end with just a massage?"

"There are many cases where it doesn't."

Since it's the service industry, if there are those who give additional service that is difficult to speak of if the customer asks for it, there are also those who do not. It is common knowledge in the pleasure district.

Jinshi ignored the bathroom and came back.

"What about your bath?"

“I’ll hold back on that.”

“What about changing clothes?”

“I’ll do it myself.”

Jinshi said, throwing off his clothes and putting on the sleepwear.

(How muscular.)

There was no feeling in the matter-of-fact impression.

Maomao courteously picked up the fallen clothes, folded them neatly and put them in his luggage.

Maomao took the bowl and small teapot that had been left on the side of the bed. She poured out the liquid from the teapot and passed it to Jinshi.

“Is this a sleeping-draught or what?”

Jinshi said, holding it in his mouth. It must have a strange taste.

“It’s an analeptic.”

At Maomao’s words, the tea spurted out of Jinshi’s mouth.

“Why, why an analeptic?”

“I heard that is best when gentlemen are tired.”

“...are you saying this knowing the meaning?”

“What other meaning is there?”

Maomao said. Jinshi gave an awkward-ish, shy-ish expression.

(It’s hard to say it openly huh.)

Nevermind that he is gentlemen, It must be embarrassing to speak about that kind of

biological thing. Jinshi is still young – could it be that he is not as mature as he looks? Considering that, Jinshi's reaction was a little different to what she expected, but she shouldn't mind that.

Maomao continued speaking to Jinshi who kept lowering his eyes.

“Well then, what kind of girl do you like?”

Maomao clapped twice and a troupe of five gorgeous girls appeared from the inside. All of them were sweet and still retained their innocent looks.

Again, since he often commented about her sense of virtue before, she tried arranging for virgins. It is more desirable since they won't have diseases either.

It was difficult to have all of them arranged from the Rokushoukan, so they also talked to other brothels and had some temporarily sent in.

The madam had knitted her brows, but it was hard to arrange just that with the short notice.

The girls had only heard that the other party is a noble, so they were quite eager. They sighed from the beauty that was visible from the gap of Jinshi's mask.

Speaking of that popular noble, he was taken back with his mouth stupidly gapped open. It was understandable even under the mask – Maomao saw his silly actions.

In the corner of the room, Gaoshun wasn't just clutching his head, he was pressing his forehead against the wall.

“Are none to your liking?”

The ones who reacted to Maomao's inquiry wasn't Jinshi but the courtesans. Each and every one of them directed their gestures what they believe is their charm towards Jinshi.

“All of them are inexperienced. The madam has checked properly.”

How she checked that, she shall take by conjecture.

Jinshi, who was moving stiffly like a puppet, looked at Maomao.

“...for the time being, I just want to sleep. Let me sleep.”

“Is that so?”

Maomao drooped her shoulders in disappointment and requested to have the dissatisfied courtesans withdraw from the room.

She went to Gaoshun whose shoulders were even more drooped,

“What about you instead?”

and when she asked,

“I am a hen-pecked husband.”

he said. Indeed, offering courtesans to a married man is a bit problematic.

Since the taciturn attendant was finding it hard to remain standing, she decided to have him sit on the sofa for stability. He had politely refused an empty room with a complete set of futon.

Maomao carefully covered Jinshi with the blanket.

Just as she was going to leave the room herself, he grabbed her arm.

“Sing me a lullaby.”

She was on the verge of refusing, but he was glancing at her with the puppy dog eyes he occasionally displayed. Besides, with the fruitless effort at present, Jinshi’s fatigue hasn’t seemed to have been vanquished.

“I’m lousy at it.”

“I don’t mind.”

Slowly tapping to the beat on the blanket, Maomao started to sing. It is a nursery song sung by courtesans.

It didn’t take much time for her to hear the sounds of Jinshi sleeping.

Chapter 5

The Robe of the Fire Rat

It was dusk, before sunset, when Jinshi went back. Perhaps due to having slept, his complexion was good that he also ate three bowls of congee when he woke up. Would it be meddlesome to wonder if Suiren will get angry at him if he skips dinner when he gets back?

He firmly put on the mask, and Maomao sent off his carriage. When she did so, she felt some sort of gaze. She turned back to take a look, and there was a scantily clad courtesan smoking a pipe while leaning against the first-floor guardrail. It was Pairin, one of the Three Princesses. Her voluptuous body was spilling out from the openings of her clothes.

“How about you give up soon?”

“Give up what?”

Maomao ignored the smirking older sister and returned to the pharmacy.



The pharmacy closed with the lighting of the Rokushoukan lanterns. There won't be decent customers coming at night for business, and it was a waste of lantern oil price.

After Maomao counted the shop proceeds, she turned it over to the madam. If she were to hold a large amount of money in the dilapidated shack she lived in, she will be targeted by robbers. It was better to store it properly no matter much money she earned. She put the kindling coal and medicinals to order and locked up the small shop.

“Oi, we're going back—”

“Ehhh-, already—”

Maomao, while grabbing the reluctant Chou'u by the scruff of his neck, returned to their shack. The house that was just behind the Rokushoukan was draughty and very cold.

She lit up the kindling coal with the burning paper from the stove. She added firewood when the fire grew.

Chou'u seemed cold – he had wrapped himself up with the futon and was curled up on the sleeping straw.

Maomao warmed up the broth as she stirred the pot on the stove. It was a mixture of the vegetables and arrowroot harvested from the garden in dried meat stock. Since it's cold, she also added in some ginger slices.

“Oi, you eating?”

“I'm eating—”

She dropped a fist onto Chou'u who was rolling around like a caterpillar. She tugged away the futon and threw a padded shirt at him instead.

(I want another set of winter clothes.)

Though she received enough money, she had no intentions of squandering it away. Chou'u was complaining, but as far as he was in Maomao's custody, she planned to educate him that those who do not work do not eat.

She poured the broth into a chipped bowl and passed it to Chou'u. He sipped the broth while sitting on a chair with his knees drawn up.

“Add more meat—”

“Then go earn money.”

Maomao slurped the soup. There was no congee, she got bread instead. She hung the stock of bread across the stove and warmed it, then cut it in half and added the simmered vegetables inside.

“Freckles–, you earn quite a bit already, so how about we eat something better–?”

Though he complained, Chou'u reached out for his second helping of bread.

"Stuuupid, I'm renting that shop from that gran. How much do you think the rent is?"

"Then move somewhere else—."

"Heyy. There are a whole lot of other things if I work elsewhere too."

Saying that, Maomao soaked the bread into the rest of the broth and threw it into her mouth.

It should be possible to think about being little more extravagant. But there were also reasons not to do so.

"...tomorrow, I'm going clothes shopping, so come along. It'll be cold at this rate, right?"

Maomao said only that, and began to tidy up the dishes.

"Yay," Chou'u spread his limbs out widely and fell off the chair. Was it because half his body is paralysed, he couldn't catch himself properly and was now writhing around.

(...)

Maomao watched him with cold eyes and put the bowls in the bucket.



The next day, they went to the market. The main street that divided the capital into east and west is set up with a market every day. If you go north, it is lined up with splendid shops, and the grade lowers as you go south. The pleasure district is in the south of the capital, so the starting point of the market began with only crude goods on woven mats without a tent.

Also, if you go into the side roads, suspicious carts are common too. Perhaps with the pleasure district being nearby, there aren't few shops selling strange drugs. Of course, Maomao, being a doctor, won't get caught in this kind of things. The merchants also don't call out to her, as they don't consider her a customer.

As she grabbed the scruff of Chou'u's neck, who kept walking about, Maomao headed

to the centre of the capital. There is a saying that buying cheap goods is a waste of money. The padded shirts in the stalls were certainly cheap, but the materials were crude. It'll end up getting torn by the brat if he runs around that way.

Even it was somewhat expensive, she can have a peace of mind from the reliable goods from the stores. Since they were trading in a settled plot of land, they place importance on trust.

Maomao entered her regular shop among the row of shops. It was a clothing shop aimed at the masses, but they also handled second-hand goods.

They passed under the sunshade, entering the shop. Clothes hung down from the ceiling. The shop owner was yawning as he mended clothes inside. The brazier beside him was cracking with the popping of embers. It was enclosed so the clothes won't catch sparks.

"Ehh—, second-hand goods really?—"

"Don't be extravagant."

Chou'u is still small. He'll be growing quickly from here on. It will be more convenient to buy clothes he can change out of quickly.

Are there no padded shirts for children? She looked at the goods, and suddenly something caught her eyes.

"What is this?"

The sharp-sighted Chou'u came over. It was the dress that was hanging on the wall. A long aoqun(襖裙, a type of ruqun/traditional Han female dress popular during the late Ming dynasty.). It was white both top and bottom, so it looked tasteless. Resembling the outfit of some foreign tribe, it was emanating a strange air. The sleeves caught her eyes -it had embroidery that looked like ivy.

"It's kinda shabby."

The honest brat spoke what he thought. The shop old man must have heard him – she slapped his head but what they heard was his laughter.

“Hahah, do you think that’s shabby?”

“But isn’t it? Shouldn’t a girl’s outfit use more showy colours?”

“I guess so.”

The shop owner stabbed a pin into the pincushion and came towards them while relaxing his stiff shoulders.

And then he squinted up at that dress.

“That, you know, is the dress worn by a celestial maiden.”

“Celestial maiden?”

Chou’u bent forward in fascination. As if he couldn’t keep standing for long due to the numbness on his body, he was sitting on the dresser before long.

While amazed, Maomao continued to search high and low in the shop. The owner talking to his customers like that, is wasting time. She didn’t know how much of his words were true. However, she recalled how her adoptive father Ruomen often ended up getting caught up in things and wasting half a day of work.

(Let’s decide quickly and return quickly.)

It is perfect that Chou’u is engrossed in the story, let’s decide during then. However, she had no choice in hearing the owner’s story inside the narrow shop.



Let’s see. This garment is an article brought in from the west.

In a certain village in the west, a villager had rescued a girl who had lost her way. The girl was beautiful, so the villager was charmed by her.

The girl was a mysterious girl; the thread she spun was different to any thread – she repaid the villager by weaving many clothes with that. The clothes that were embroidered with a mysterious design sold many times more than other fabric.

The girl wanted to return to her hometown many times, but she didn't even know where she lived. The villager proposed to her many times, and the girl finally accepted.

But you see, the timing was bad. It was about that time, that the girl's family who have come to find her visited the village. The village, who finally obtained the girl, didn't want to part with her. He hid her, and all the villagers feigned ignorance.

The girl's family returned once, but it seemed they found it suspicious. That's why, the villager decided to speed up on finishing the wedding ceremony and marry the girl. If she married once, her family won't be her family anymore.

The girl refused, but the villager didn't know about that. She decided to bathe in the village spring and cleanse her body, and quickly perform the wedding ceremony. The girl cried as she bathed. At least, the wedding dress she wore was what the girl had made of her hometown.

How sorrowful was the girl? Even when she changed into her wedding dress, her tears never ceased and continued to soak her entire body.

As everyone celebrated, the girl headed for the alter to pledge with the villager. However, it seems the girl couldn't forget about her family.

I want you to return me to my family, she petitioned.

If that is no good, the girl doused herself with the oil that was at the place. Then she tipped the torch flame onto her body.

The girl, who burst into flames, ran through the confused villagers. And then she disappeared into the spring.

What was left was a single sheet of cloth – the veil the girl wore on her head.

The girl who was covered in flames was gone, perhaps she returned to the heavens, the villager thought.

The girl's family had also disappeared. They have returned to the heavens with the girl, so everyone agreed.



“And this is the dress that was woven by the celestial maiden.”

“Heeeeh.”

Chou’u was in awe.

I wonder if it really is such a thing, Maomao compared the several padded shirts she picked up with Chou’u’s back.

“Hey, Freckles. This is amazing. It’s amazing. How about we buy it?”

Chou’u asked, his eyes glittering.

“That’s right. Lass must be around the same age as the celestial maiden. I’ll lower the price for our friendship.”

So he said, but the abacus he flipped was one digit off. Maomao almost snorted.

“Oi oi, you don’t believe the legend of the celestial maiden? You’re not romantic at all.”

“What a pity,” the shop owner spread his hands and shook his head. Maomao squinted and looked at the dress that was woven by the celestial maiden or something.

“Can I touch it a little?”

“Yeah. Just don’t dirty it.”

She stared at the embroidery on the sleeves and touched it to make sure. And then she grinned.

“Owner, can you sell it at this price?”

“...Wh-what are you talking about? Of course I can sell it.”

Considering all that, he was trying to sell it off to Maomao. If it is really the dress of the celestial maiden, it should be fine to have the price that is different by yet another digit.

Maomao picked up the dress in her hands.

“Hey, owner, how about you sell this at ten times this price?”

“Ten times? Haha, I’ll be happy if that’s the case. The dress you’re holding, I’ll just give it you.”

He said it jokingly.

“Hohoh, is that so? Chou’u, did you just hear that?”

“I heard, but there’s no way you can sell it for ten times, right? What are you talking about, Freckles.”

Even Chou’u said like she was a fool.

Maomao curled her lips and held the brazier coal with metal chopsticks.

“Owner, I’m going to borrow this dress and charcoal for a bit.”

“Oi! What are you doing!”

Maomao took out her coin purse from her bosom and placed it on the dresser with a thud. It was all the money she had, but it should make up for one of this garment.

Giving the silenced shop old man a backward glance, she took the dress and charcoal outside the shop.

Then, Maomao threw the dress onto the street.

“O, oi!”

She knew nothing about the shop owner’s face contorting.

And then, she dropped the coal she was grabbing with the chopsticks onto the dress.



“Freckles—, it’s kinda hot—”

Chou’u, who was wearing several layers of padded shirts, said. He was wearing so much that his figure looked like a daruma.

“Then take it off.”

It was Chou’u who had worn it, saying that he hated carrying it. Maomao was holding her new clothes in her right hand.

Maomao would have preferred something with more subdued colours, but she had no plans to nit-pick on something that was just given to her.

“Hey, Freckles. Why didn’t that dress burn?”

Chou’u asked, his head tilted.

The article the shop owner had called the celestial maiden’s dress, Maomao unintentionally snorted. That thing had a better name.

The robe of the fire rat (The fire rat is an imaginary creature of Ancient China, said to live in the volcanoes of the South China Sea and have fireproof fur. The third impossible gift requested by Princess Kaguya to the five princes who wanted her hand in marriage in the Bamboo-cutter’s Tale.), Maomao had mentioned. From the start, the thing Maomao, who had whispered that into the shop owner’s ear, had said, but—

The dress didn’t catch fire even when the burning coal was placed on it. Instead, there wasn’t even a scorch mark.

“Chou’u, did you know what material are clothes made from?”

“Cotton and linen? I heard that is mostly made from plants.”

“That just then, was made from rock.”

Chou’u’s expression transformed to interest.

“Rock, from rock, you say! How is that possible?”

“Rock has many forms.”

Fibrous rock can be made into fabric. It is rare but this is something that has been around since olden times. It is called asbestos cloth. That was slightly tasteless, so she loaned the name used in the island country of the east.

“It won’t burn because it’s rock.”

However, what would the people who see that think? Even if they knew about the existence of asbestos cloth, it should mostly be people who see it for the first time. With the help of that rarity, there would more or less be whimsicals who would buy it even with an inflated price.

And so, Maomao could get her hands on clothes as it is.

“Heh, is that so. Then, what about the celestial maiden story?”

“That would have to be—“

Half-truth and half-lie.

The embroidery on the sleeves of the dress, Maomao had recognised. It is the western script that Ruomen, her dad, had often written in. The cursive script must look like an ivy design.

She guessed that the girl that was called a celestial maiden was a western race or a traveller. In rural villages, as consanguineous marriages continue, the offspring will weaken so they would be in need of new blood from elsewhere. She didn’t know if the girl really was lost or that she had been abducted, and if there had been such a girl, they wouldn’t think of parting with her.

The girl, wholeheartedly wishing to return to home, made clothes. Using unusual rock fibres as material, and embroidering with the script that the villagers cannot read as the pattern, she secretly called for the people of her hometown to save her.

In the event of the wedding ceremony, the girl must have worn wet underclothes under her asbestos garment. Her hair was also wet; she had covered that with the veil.

“Did you know? There is a method to not make wooden bowls catch fire.”

You put water in the bowl. In doing so, that wooden bowl will not burn until the water has completely dried up. As long as there is water, if the temperature is constant, the wood will not burn at that temperature.

The asbestos dress over the wet underclothes – she had also worn an outfit that doesn’t burn easily on top.

Before she gets burned, she could just jump into the lake.

If the escape method was recorded in the design of the garment, the girl must have been saved afterward. Of course, she cannot guarantee that went well, but as far as what she heard from the shop owner’s story, it looked like it succeeded.

“Hoeeeehh.”

Chou’u was in awe, his face foolish.

“Why didn’t you tell the old chap of the store that?”

“Romance is important, right?”

There’s no need to destroy it that much, Maomao said, and Chou’u laughed with a face of amazement.

Chapter 6

The Final Volume

It was Gaoshun's son, Basen, who knocked on the doors of the pharmacy while carrying several volumes of illustrated books.

Maomao presented a tattered zabuton to the young man who was displeased as usual, and served him tea.

"Jinshi-sama is busy."

Seems like, Basen wanted to say that Jinshi had no free time to come here, in other words.

Still using the eunuch name Jinshi, meant it was an alias, but above all, would also have to be that he cannot mention his real name. His blue-blooded name cannot be lightly spoken of before the townspeople.

The eyes of the courtesans of Rokushoukan were sparkling towards the guest who was different to the usual handsome man and his attendant. The madam especially – Maomao could understand that the crone was flipping the abacus in her head while acting nonchalant.

Unlike the time with Jinshi, the door of the pharmacy remained open, so it was clear what was happening inside.

"It's the things you mentioned."

Basen took out the thick books from the cloth bundle. Out came the illustrated books she recognised.

She picked out the insect illustrated book from among the array of bird, fish, insects, and plants.

What Maomao was fundamentally interested in were the ingredients for natural

remedies. Though she had read the plant illustrated book like she could taste it, she only flipped through the insect book.

However, Sazen said that the court physician had researched locusts. It should be there.

However, she couldn't find it. No matter how many times she read over it, she couldn't find it. In the end, even Basen started to flip through it.

"...is it not there?"

"It's not there."

"Didn't you say it had it?"

Even if she said so, there's nothing if there's nothing.

How could this be? Could she have been deceived by Sazen?

No, there is no merit for that man to do such a thing.

"Did somebody take it while this was in storage?"

"Who would be interested in this kind of thing?"

"The people who like it like it."

However, that would also be hard to think of. If they were to specifically go steal from that place, there should be expensive things that would be more understandable.

She groaned, then noticed a shadow coming towards the pharmacy.

From the willowy sashaying despite her voluptuous body, it was Pairin-nee chan.

(...)

Maomao contorted her face. She could see the madam at the back was making no move of stopping Pairin. It seems they are finally done with the appraisal of Basen.

Pairin-nee chan is a very pleasant courtesan. She is the oldest courtesan in the

Rokushoukan, but her beauty, still fascinating to many gentlemen, has yet to wane. The mongrel, the military officer Rihaku, is a good example.

She is also known as the best dancer in the capital.

She is kind to young courtesans and kamuro, a good elder sister, but...

That courtesan also has a flaw.

Pairin, who appeared relaxedly, stood behind Basen. And then, her neat, beautiful fingers slid across Basen's cheeks.

"!?"

Basen shivered and spontaneously, while sitting, flew up. He might not know, but he gave her something useful, to hop while sitting.

"Neechan."

"Ah, I'm sorry. There was dust on your shoulders."

It's a lie, definitely a lie.

Was there a need for her to touch his cheeks?

From her sashaying movements, her femininity drifted about.

Her eyes were smiling gracefully, but Maomao was reminded of the eyes of a hunting carnivore.

Her older sister had been grinding tea for the last few couple of days – in other words, she had no guests. It wasn't that she couldn't sell, rather it was shameful to have a high-class courtesan take guests every day.

In other words, how should she say it?

This courtesan seems to be dissatisfied about that.

It meant she was frustrated.

"Wh-what? Just what!?"

“Oh my, it hasn’t come off yet. Come on, I’ll take it off for you, so stay still.”

Inside the cramped pharmacy, Basen shrank back, and Pairin chased.

So things wouldn’t get knocked over, Maomao put the mortar and grinder onto the shelf before Basen came over. She propped the teacups and tea snacks onto the tray and carried it.

(You can have a free service for the first time.)

No, he didn’t have that composure. She didn’t know if Basen’s face was red or green. *It’ll be amusing if Rihaku came in right now*, Maomao put on her shoes and ate the tea snacks she was protecting. It was just like the madam to give out confectionary that was of a much lower grade than when Jinshi came. Even so, it was superior enough. The senbei with a faint aroma of shrimp was to Maomao’s liking.

(Oh my, it’s the first picking of the season.)

She somehow inferred that, but she was confident. While thinking so that’s how it is, she leaned against the wall, grabbed another senbei and washed it down with tea.

The kamuro were looking at her enviously, but there was no way they could do it before the madam. It can’t be helped, she stopped taking another one and decided to leave it.

“Ahhh! Whatever, I’m leaving. I’ve already passed over what I am supposed to pass over.”

As he tugged away his loosened sash, Basen left the pharmacy.

“Aaannh.”

Pairin sat down reluctantly.

“Even though he was the long-awaited first picking...”

It seems he really was the first picking.

If it wasn’t for this side of her, she would really be a good elder sister. It feels that she is getting worse year by the year.

“Even though it’ll be paradise if he falls into it once, right?”

The madam also said regretfully.

(No, wouldn’t that be no good?)

Rihaku needs to save up his coins quickly and redeem her, Maomao thought.



Sazen was sweeping outside.

While he was unsatisfactory to work as a manservant as he still didn’t have enough strength, he was made to do work that wasn’t different to the kamuro. That was the way the head manservant, Ukyou, did things. Were he be satisfied with this, he won’t be useful as a manservant and will eventually be dismissed. Those who are indignant with this and try to learn other jobs are properly favoured.

Seeing how Sazen was humming as he held the broom, no matter how you see it, he could only be on the dismissed side.

“Oi.”

“Mm?”

Sazen, who changed out of his filthy appearance and shaved his beard, looked many years younger.

“The books have been delivered.”

Saying so, Maomao showed him the books that Basen had brought over just then. With a thud, Maomao set down the books that were wrapped in a cloth bundle.

“It is different to what you said.”

There were fourteen volumes in total, counting in the ones that Sazen had possessed. However, they didn’t have notes on locusts. Maomao was pretty sure that when she was in that research room, there were fourteen volumes, so the numbers shouldn’t be off.

“No, that shouldn’t be.”

Sazen stripped of the cloth wrapping and checked the contents.

He squinted, and stared.

“Oi, that ain’t all of it.”

“That’s all there was in that room.”

Maomao had also counted. She couldn’t be wrong.

“No, this book.”

Sazen took the insect book. The insect illustrated book had two volumes; none of them had notes on locusts. They were labelled with numbers: “One” and “Two”.

“The insect illustrated book should have three volumes.”

“...what the heck.”

If it’s like so, then it wasn’t in the room from the start. At least, in the time point Maomao came, someone had already taken it out.

“Uwahh, who is it? To have taken that kind of thing away.”

“Wouldn’t that be you?”

“No, it’s not that. When the elderly man was around, it was surely there.”

The elderly man would have to be the court physician who got banished from the inner palace. If she remembered correctly, she heard that he had researched immortality.

“Could it have been in the elderly man’s coffin”

“Why would you do such a thing?”

“It’s a custom in my hometown.”

No, she wasn't interested in Sazen's hometown.

However, she was interested in the elderly man that Sazen mentioned.

"Speaking of which, how did he die?"

Could it be old age? He'll be around the same age as her dad if he's alive, so it won't be particularly strange.

"About that. It looks like his experiment failed."

"Failed?"

"If you make something like the elixir of life, you will need to experiment, right?"

(Is that...)

Maomao had a mysterious thought.

The resurrection drug that had been used on the children with Chou'u included, about that.

Chou'u still had numbness in his body, but the medicine that revived you after your dying once, naturally, would rarely go well. *There is no other way to than to increase the success rate by repeating the experiment countless times*, Maomao thought.

Then, how did he test out that experiment?

Animals? Or, he would have to test it out on similar humans, right?

"Oi, what is it? Uugh!"

Sazen's face stiffened. She wondered why, but she soon understood.

The corners of her mouth had quirked up more greatly than usual. She was grinning.

"Hey, who dealt with his body?"

“I don’t know. Most of that was done by that person.”

“That person?”

Sazen scratched his head roughly.

“You’ll know if I say Suirei-san. She was the elderly man’s assistant.”

“Allright!”

Maomao inadvertently slapped Sazen’s back with all her strength.

“Oww! What was that for?”

“I got it. Don’t shirk on sweeping.”

Maomao rewrapped the books into the cloth bundle, and quickly returned to the pharmacy to prepare a letter.

Chapter 7

The Aftermath of the Court Physician

Maomao got a manservant to quickly send off the letter she had written. Since it will have to follow the steps if it were to be directly delivered to Jinshi, she asked Gaoshun or Basen for the most part. Though, as Basen was lacking in quite some parts, she usually addressed it to Gaoshun.

The reply to the letter came promptly the next morning. And soon after, the carriage to pick up Maomao arrived. It was headed to the place where Suirei is. If she remembered properly, she heard that it is where the former of the Four Madames, Ah Duo, is.

Maomao passed all the illustrated books into the custody of the attendant who showed up, then closed the door of the pharmacy.

“How nice—. Are you going out?”

Chou’u was greatly interested, tugging on Maomao’s sleeves. Maomao grimaced.

“Take me along—.”

“No.”

There wasn’t just Suirei at Ah Duo’s place. The Shi Clan children were also there. It would be meaningless to take the trouble to have him raised separately if she were to bring him along.

“Why? Petty!”

“I’m going for work. You can go sweep the shopfront.”

She pounded his head, then handed him over to Ukyou who was nearby. The child-loving Ukyou piggybacked Chou’u and distanced themselves from the carriage.

If half his body didn't remain paralysed, they could have raised him as a manservant. However, the guards of the brothel required strength at it is.

(Shall I make him into a pharmacist?)

However, he exhibited not even interest at present. When Maomao was his age, she had learned a hundred medicinal compounds.

(Even though it's interesting.)

Maomao made a slightly sulky face, then boarded the carriage.



Ah Duo's estate, as the emperor's villa, was greatly imposing. Due to that, Maomao was forced to change her clothes before she disembarked from the carriage. Though Ah Duo didn't seem to care about this sort of thing, it had to be etiquette.

Maomao clutched onto her long skirt, walking so to keep it clean. She passed under the splendid gate and walked on the garden that was spread out with pebbles. The garden, that looked like a picture with garden stones, pebbles, and moss, was beautiful that it made you feel the gardener's pride.

After walking for a short while, the owner of the residence, Ah Duo, and one other person was in the room she arrived. Both of them assumed the appearances of gentlemen. The other person was Suirei.

"Welcome."

Her dignified tone was unchanged – rather, it was livelier than before. Her appearance as well. Her current lifestyle must be well-suited to her.

Suirei – as if that was what she was used to, or for a different reason – was also dressed as a man. She stood a step behind Ah Duo, expressionless as usual.

"There shouldn't particularly be a need for introductory remarks. I'm present, but do speak as if I'm not here."

Ah Duo said, and sat comfortably on the couch.

She signalled them to sit with her hand, so Maomao – being the guest – sat down next, and Suirei sat last.

(Even if you tell me to speak as if you're not here.)

Wouldn't it be normal to end up getting anxious? Maomao, feeling the challenge of doing so, placed the illustrated books the attendant brought in over on the table.

For now, Jinshi's side should take more account of the things that would be bad if known. She had no choice but to proceed as it is.

"Do you recognise this?"

"It is what my teacher used."

Could it be because she is before Ah Duo? Suirei's speech was more courteous than usual.

"Is this all of it?"

At the question, Suiren looked at the illustrated books with her head tilted.

"...it is missing one volume. I'm pretty sure there were fifteen volumes."

"Do you know where the last volume is?"

"I do not know."

It didn't look like Suirei who was speaking quietly was lying. She shouldn't have a reason to lie, above all.

She no longer had any relation to the Shi Clan. She, who had no reason to appear in public after all this time, is only left with a life where she is kept until she dies. What will happen to her from now on, what the emperor was thinking – Maomao didn't know, but she thought that it was a waste.

If she didn't know about the book, then she could only strike on this question next.

"Then, your teacher, where is he now?"

She didn't overlook that Suirei gave a start. Ah Duo watched the woman as she drank tea.

"So, he really is alive."

Maomao said in confirmation.

"The resurrection medicine, did your teacher try it on himself?"

Suirei lowered her gaze. Her eyes slowly closed, and she nodded in resignation.

"...it is as you say. If he didn't do so, he wouldn't have been able to leave that fortress."

As an experiment as well, Suirei's teacher drank the resurrection medicine. And from her hints, Maomao guessed that he was still alive. Only just—.

"But, there would have to be something I want to know that you won't let out?"

"What are you talking about?"

At Maomao's question, Suirei responded, her eyes cracking slightly open.

"Chou'u, that's his current name. Had you guessed it when you saw that child?"

Chou'u, upon dying from drinking the medicine, had revived. However, as a result, the freedom of half his body was stolen. He even lost his memories.

"Even when I say that he lost his memories?"

"It's a little different, but it's that part. Rather, you might have walked passed him without knowing."

"What do you mean?"

Suirei lowered her lashes sadly.

"Do you remember the hot spring village we used to treat the children?"

“Yes.”

“My teacher is one of the old men bedridden there.”

She could recall a place like that in the hot spring village. There were many people who had already started dementia wandering about.

“He had already forgotten who I was. If teacher was in good health, that child wouldn’t have thought about involving you in that incident too.”

When she mentioned ‘that child’, Suirei’s face darkened once more.

Suirei and Shisui, what kind of relation the two had built up as half-sisters – Maomao didn’t know. It was only that the smart Suirei must have realised that the reason Shisui had caused the matter had to also be related to herself.

“...is that how it is?”

Crestfallen, Maomao felt energy escaping from her whole body.

She had thought she was getting information after all this effort. No, she still had hope.

“Then, I want to know about the locust that your teacher had researched.”

Maomao placed the insect illustrated book before Suirei.

However, Suirei shook her head again.

“I did not take part in that case. Insects, would fall into that child’s territory.”

And ‘that child’ was no longer around.

Once again, Maomao drooped her shoulders.

“When he was ordered to create the elixir of life, the materials teacher had researched up until then were almost disposed. The things brought with him were to the extent of what was in that room.”

In order to focus on making the elixir of life, they tried to erase the research he had done until then. Suirei’s teacher, who had wanted to continue with it no matter what,

had used Sazen and studied on various things.

“I see.”

Suddenly, Ah Duo, who had been listening quietly, moved. She set the teacup on the table and looked at Suirei.

“I heard ‘that child’ was a very bright child.”

“No matter how bright a child she was, she’s no longer around.”

It can’t be helped that she is not around. There was nothing they could do.

“Then, could that bright child be gone without leaving anything behind?”

“!?”

There was a thud. Maomao had hit the table with her hand, and Suirei had stood up energetically.

“...no, my sincere apologies.”

“It’s fine. Be more at ease.”

Ah Duo said to the apologising Suirei.

“I hate formality. I want you to be more at ease. This one doesn’t mind that kind of thing, aren’t you brooding?”

No, she should have apologised, Maomao thought as well. However, she realised that she was stuck on something that Ah Duo had said just then.

What couldn’t it be?

Just what...

She traced her memories. Was there something at the fortress? Or was it before that...

Before. The inner palace. Medical office? No, that’s wrong.

If she remembered correctly, that place was...

Maomao banged on the table again.

“It’s the clinic! The clinic. What happened to the clinic now?”

Before Maomao was swept away from the inner palace, she was in the clinic. The thing she discovered there. The book that was inserted into the bookshelf. That illustrated book, wasn’t that also on insects?

(What a cunning person.)

Recalling the girl she can no longer meet, Maomao laughed. Aiming barely for that, thinking that she might have wanted to show Maomao, she went beyond chagrin, and laughter welled up.

As she laughed in delight while recalling Shisui’s pranking face, Maomao slapped the table many times.

Chapter 8

Illustrated Book

It was said the clinic had been closed down once. Although it wasn't all the members, it was a serious crime to assist in an escape from the inner palace, and even among them, the crimes of the palace lady called Shenryu were heavy.

Shenryu attempted suicide, and though her life was preserved, she was treated as a criminal.

However, in the inner palace where the medical office is hopeless, the clinic is an indispensable existence. It seems that, although it is under the eunuchs' surveillance now, the closing down has been revoked.

However, during the time Maomao was kidnapped, everything in the clinic had been thoroughly seized beforehand. And the illustrated book that Maomao had seen then was there.

"It's done with this, right?"

Jinshi presented her the illustrated book. It seems he finally got a break today. Gaoshun should be receiving tea from the kamuro outside the pharmacy.

"Excuse me."

Maomao accepted the illustrated book and flipped through the pages. She found a lot of handwritten sections inside. The handwritten papers fell out when she slowly opened it.

Maomao placed the book on the floor, opened at the page for Jinshi to see. And then she carefully lined up the papers that had fallen out.

"It's this."

There were a lot of detailed drawings of insects. The drawings all looked similar, but

since they were labelled grasshopper, they would have to be grasshoppers.

The full body drawing focused on the legs and wings. There were various drawings of the breakdowns of its parts. The colouring, though slightly dull, was thorough.

Among them were two large drawings of insects. If you were pedantic, you can separate it into three. Maomao classified them as she read the description in the illustrated book.

“This grasshopper seemed to be the one that’s normally found.”

She pointed to the grasshopper that was painted green. She didn’t know with the full body drawing, but when she saw the drawing of only the dissected wing part, she could see that it was a little shorter compared to the other two.

“And, this, is the one we believed to have increased in numbers this year. This variety is the one that causes locust plagues.”

Jinshi should have also read the text, but she took upon herself to voice it out. Doing so will engrave it into her memories, it would be easier to remember.

She gathered that Jinshi was also silent to think about this.

The grasshopper painted brown had wings that were longer than the green one.

“And, wasn’t it written that the small-scale locust plague that broke out last year was from this one?”

She picked up the drawing of the grasshopper in the middle.

Its shape was between the green and brown ones; the colouring was also in between.

“In other words, it becomes this brown grasshopper by decreasing its growth stages?”

“It seems to be the case.”

Grasshoppers gather in certain conditions, and their body colour and wing shape changes. This takes several generations, and they seem to increase their numbers each time.

Do their forms change due to the increase in numbers? Do their numbers increase due

to their forms changing? Speaking of which one, it was written as an addendum in the illustrated book that the reason was the former.

In other words, the small-scale locust damage is the herald of a large-scale one afterwards.

“So there will be greater damages this year?”

“Indeed, I don’t know how great the scale will be, though.”

It’s just that if the prediction is wrong, there will be a locust plague where people will die from starvation. By making light of the insects, they will incidentally cloak the sky, and all and every grain will be eaten up.

Maomao was raised in the capital so she had never seen such a thing, but there were many girls among the courtesans that had been sold to the pleasure district from rural villages due to having nothing to eat from the locust damage.

And besides, the timing is also bad.

Last year, the news of the overthrown Shi Clan spread all over the country. It seems that locust plagues are treated as a way to test the reign through the scale of the damages it wrought since olden times. And so, if locust plagues occurred, the reign had issues – there were not few – and it was a recognition that the heavens were punishing the emperor.

If the locust plagues become worse next year with the Shi Clan incident, it wouldn’t be amusing for the country.

Well then, what Maomao and Jinshi had wanted to know wasn’t just that. If research had been done on locust plagues, they must also be studies on its prevention methods.

But...

““ ””
...

There wasn’t a silver bullet mentioned there.

About dealing with the next plague after a small scale plague occurs – that was

enumerated. Either of them were in forms that were close to human-wave tactics.

It was important to exterminate them while they were in their larvae stage. For that reason, there was a production method written up for an effective pesticide. Maybe as it uses up a large quantity, it appears to be made with ingredients that are relatively easy to acquire.

Also, in the case of the grasshoppers reaching the adult stage, it was recommended cook them with fire. This was an approach from olden times. Were they are summer insects that jump into fire?

“We didn’t obtain significant information.”

“No, it would become a grave matter if we left it as it is without knowing, wouldn’t it?”

Jinshi scratched his head as he took out a large map from his breast pocket. It was a map on the central of this country all the way to the Shi Northern Province and the western regions – there were many scarlet circles on it. To digress, the central is called the Ka Central Province, and she didn’t know what name the Shi Northern Province will be changed to hereafter.

“The locations of the rural villages that had reports of damage. Can you understand anything with this?”

“Even if you ask me that.”

She heard that locust plagues commonly occur in vast grassy plains. Certainly, the locations of all those villages were close to plains.

“Is it really true that it is easy to breed grasshoppers in places with lots of plains?”

“I guess so. But, in this place, it has already been several decades where locust plagues haven’t occurred though.”

Jinshi turned the map around and circled with his finger for her to see. It was right in the area that was under the direct control of the Shi Clan in the northern regions. It was a fertile farming area, but it was adjacent to the forests and mountains.

For some reason, Jinshi was irately pointing to the section of the forest.

“I thought that normally, close to the forests, birds eat insects, but...”

“That huh.”

The Shi Northern Province was abundant in lumber, but it seems its environs had already been reduced to treeless hills. The felling of lumber in this country had been excessively prohibited during the era of the Empress.

Due to the passing of the Empress, it seems the good-for-nothings of the Shi Clan had been felling without informing the central.

She was told that, in order to raise the price of the portions that flowed within the country, everything else was sold off in other countries.

Because of the reckless lumbering, it seems the nature of the area has become greatly disturbed.

“...so with that, are you saying that the locust plagues are because there are no birds?”

“You’ve thought enough.”

He got sorrowful for some reason.

The intensity of Jinshi’s depression might be, to some extent, from his anticipation of the Shi Northern Province’s forest resources. With the money acquired from selling lumber to fill in the gaps where the grains couldn’t be harvested, he might have appraised that it could be managed somehow or another if they buy extra food from far away, but he had been crushed from that basis.

(Huh?)

In that case, concerning the reason the Empress had limited the felling of lumber, she had wondered perhaps. But let’s take that into a consideration again.

Maomao stared at the map. She looked at the description of the pesticide several times, then stood up.

She took out a volume from the bookshelf in the room, flipped through it, and then showed it to Jinshi.

"I believe the drug cannot possibly be enough with just this compound. The effectiveness might decrease, but I will also prepare other compounds."

And afterward, the other thing she came up with was-

"Is it no good to burn the places where the larvae come from?"

"Yeah. That also depends on the place. I think it's quick and easy to burn them to death though."

Also, what she considered is...

"To the point of a hunting ban on sparrows huh."

Sparrows are treated as a pest, but it is also big that they eat pest insects. If they hit that point beforehand, the damage that has yet to occur might be reduced. However, the people who do that as an occupation will phrase complaints.

She didn't know how much damage could be decreased even if they attempt all of those. Above all, there might be nothing of it, but if that's the case, it is good fortune so there's no issue.

To crush down on the possibility of negatives – that was the job of those that carry out the reign. Even if they cannot obtain a proper evaluation.

"A ban on sparrow hunting? There would be opposition if we suddenly imposed that."

Sparrow dishes also line up in the market of the capital. It is a relatively popular foodstuff since it is ubiquitous.

"If would be good if there was something to substitute it though."

"We might as well take up grasshopper dishes as an imperial court dish. How about that?"

Maomao said it as a good idea without thinking. If they did that, grasshoppers would become an ingredient purveyor to the imperial court, so their catching would increase, and if the emperor eats it, the officials would also eat it as servile behaviour.

However...

Jinshi stiffened.

The man who usually gave off a gorgeous colour looked grey.

(This guy...)

She thought of taking out the simmered grasshopper that still remained in this place.

Jinshi, when she thought that he finally moved, looked up, softly pressed his brows with his fingers and let out a sound that sounded like a groan. It seems his person was at a conflict. That result.

“...can we have that as the last resort?”

“It’s not an issue since they haven’t increased in particular.”

Maomao said, but she felt slightly disappointed.

By just saying that, Jinshi’s air became more motivated than before.

It seems, he hated eating it that much.

(...)

Maomao gave a faint smile.

Seeing that, Jinshi stiffened again.

“Um, Jinshi-sama.”

“Wh-what is it?”

He replied with a slight stammer.

“How about you go back after eating?”

Maomao politely requested.

Chapter 9

Portrait

Afterwards, Jinshi decided to leave after eating dinner.

Of course, as the pharmacy was cramped, she prepared a guest room that wasn't being used.

It goes without saying that Maomao served him the leftover simmered grasshopper. Of course, she wasn't planning to force him to eat it. She wasn't taking it seriously, just as a slight prank.

She was meaning to immediately take it down when Jinshi shows even a little displeasure. The madam was also glaring at her like she wanted to say something too.

However—.

Though he faltered for an instant, Jinshi put the grasshopper that Maomao had presented jokingly into his mouth.

Maomao's own face reflexively contorted.

She watched Jinshi chew the grasshopper with furrowed brows, and felt like she was looking at something she shouldn't be seeing.

Everyone around her seemed to be the same. All in all, they had expressions like lightning had crashed down behind their backs.

Gaoshun's hands were trembling.

The kamuro, who carried in the dinner, was on the verge of tears, looking as though her favourite doll had been besmirched with mud.

Chou'u, who came to pick at the dinner, became stiff faced. "This is no good," he said, shaking his head.

Even the madam's face had stiffened.

Jinshi ignored all those faces. He chewed and swallowed. His expression was still ghastly but he looked at Maomao as if he wanted to say something.

"Congee."

"Ah, yes."

She presented him the bowl of congee, but Jinshi made no movements of taking it. He alternated his gaze between the congee and Maomao.

(You want me to cool it down?)

What does he want to say? Maomao picked up the soup spoon. Was he not pleased with the ingredients? She scooped the congee and studied it. When she did so, Jinshi came forward to chomp on it.

"..."

You're not a baby.

She scooped the congee with the soup spoon once again, and he closed in again. Since it was going to spill, she brought it to his mouth.

He snapped up the congee.

Maomao narrowed her eyes as she picked up the grasshopper with a pair of chopsticks this time.

Though Jinshi scrunched up his face again, he ate it.

Eek, she heard Gaoshun's scream.

When she thought there was a thud, the kamuro was cowering on the floor with tears rolling down her cheeks. Chou'u was soothing her.

Was it really that much of a shocking scene? Maomao thought. It might be a strong stimulus for children.

“Freckles, I’m taking her out for a bit. Also, niichan, hold responsibility for what you did.”

“ ... ”

Jinshi chewed and swallowed the grasshopper with all his might. It didn’t look delicious no matter what. However, he ate it.

Chou’u left with the crying kamuro.

(I did something bad huh.)

As Jinshi had his looks, they tried not to display his face for as much as possible even in the Rokushoukan. As the courtesans won’t do their work, the madam wouldn’t want them to see him.

And so, the kamuro who carried in the meals was a girl whose mouth doesn’t work. She seemed to be a girl who got sold off after getting abused by her parents; her throat was crushed so she cannot speak. She had a considerably timid personality, but she worked steadily to return home.

Chou’u, who had the character of the boss of the children, often protected this timid kamuro somehow or other. “Because she’s a follower,” he insisted, but how about that?

Jinshi who finished swallowing the grasshopper looked at Maomao again.

(Okay okay.)

Maomao brought the spoon to Jinshi’s mouth again.



“Oi, Freckles.”

Chou’u, who finished looking after the kamuro after Jinshi left, showed up. For some reason, he was holding onto a brush and paper.

“What is with that paper?”

“Yeah, the gran gave it to me.”

“The stingy hag gave it to you?”

It's the madam that is always called thrifty. She wouldn't think that the crone would readily give out high-class items like paper.

“But she gave it to me, so it should be fine. That aside, sit there.”

“Why.”

As for Maomao, as it was late from dinner, she wanted to quickly go back to clean up the pharmacy. And yet the brat was here speaking of wilfulness.

Just as she was going to chase him out for being a bother, she heard a hoarse voice from behind him.

“Come on, listen to Chou'u. Sleep here today. Wouldn't it be rough to build a fire after going back? I'll also prepare sleepwear.”

“Gran, what is it? Did you become strange after seeing something weird?”

In response to the kind crone, her tongue unintentionally slipped. The crone dropped a fist with a speed that was unthinkable for the crone. This sh*tty hag, though older, was taller than Maomao, so her thrown off power was to the point of making her want to squirm in reflex.

“It's fine. I laid out the futon in the previous room. Take a bath before you sleep. It should still be warm.”

(How suspicious.)

While thinking that, since she was at it, she entered the room. As Chou'u spread out the paper, the madam also diligently prepared the ink.

(Too suspicious.)

For some reason, Pairin-nee-chan and Joga-nee-chan were also around as curious onlookers. It seemed they were grinding tea today. The other courtesans had

customers.

“Gran, is it alright to not watch the incense stick?”

“I left it to Ukyou. He’ll do it adequately.”

Despite having work, why is she gathered here, when she wondered that, Chou’u who finished preparing the brush looked at Maomao.

“What?”

“Freckles, tell me what man is your type.”

“Haah?”

What was he on about? It’s stupid, so she picked up the sleepwear in the basket and prepared for her bath. However, the madam tugged her sleeves and stopped her.

“Come on, be serious.”

“Maomao, it’s no good to disobey gran-“

Even Pairin told her.

Joga was smoking a pipe with an aloof expression. It’s the time the guests come and go, but since this room was a private room for people that don’t want others to know, hardly anyone comes here. And so, even if she was somewhat bad mannered, the crone won’t voice her complaints.

“For now, what is your preference? Height? Has muscles?”

(What a pain.)

“Rather than tall, it’s better to not be too big.”

“Hmhm.”

It’s best to reply dutifully – Maomao sat on the cushion reluctantly. Since it’s cold, she slipped her feet into the futon.

“Rather than skinny, it’s better to be plump.”

For the small Maomao, tall is painful for her neck.

If he’s skinny, it’ll look like he isn’t being fed, so it’ll be troubling.

“Facial hair?”

“It’s fine if he has some, but no thanks for the thick ones.”

It was said to be manly, but speaking of which side, the filthiness was stronger. Generally, when she sees those guys who shirk on grooming, she gets mad when rice get stuck to it.

“Then face_(jawline)?”

“Rather than sharp, soft is better.”

Fox eyes were no good. It would really be the worst.

“Should his brows hang down?”

“Yeah, I’ll leave that to you.”

“Hmmm, then is he something like this?”

Chou’u fluttered the paper he drew on.

“Oh myyy, he’s somewhat plain huh.”

Pairin, who preferred muscular handsome men, said.

“It’s a face that seems naive huh.”

The madam also didn’t have a really good assessment.

“The heck is this? Rejected.”

It was Joga who cut him off completely. This courtesan, one of the Three Princesses,

despite being a courtesan, had a difficult personality that was a big manhater. Most males were rejected.

And then Maomao also laid her eyes on him.

“...”

“What’s wrong?”

The madam asked the wordless Maomao.

“No, it’s because he looks so much like someone.”

“Eeehh, Maomao, don’t tell me, you have a gentleman you like—“

In response to Pairin who was in high spirits, the madam’s expression wasn’t merry.

She certainly didn’t hate him.

“What kind of man is he?”

“No, he used to be a man.”

Since he’s a eunuch...

A man that looked exactly like the quack doctor was drawn there.



Following the anticlimactic reply, everyone quickly left the room.

“Whattt, how boring.”

Pairin, who bloomed with love stories, lost interest and was the first to leave. She glanced at Maomao, but let’s not notice that.

The madam also left with a bored expression and Chou’u headed off to bath.

Last remaining was Joga who was smoking a pipe.

Joga gently opened the window. The cold wind blew in from the opened gap. The half moon and the sparse stars in the sky that looked like it's dissolved in ink, from that, you can see the windows that cast the shadows of men and women.

Tonight as well, in this brothel, a great number of love is born and will disappear along with daybreak.

As she puffed out tobacco smoke, Joga looked at Maomao.

"I'm in favour. People like men, we don't know when they will change their minds. It is all the more with men that possess power."

Joga set down the pipe. Her actions were languid yet beautiful. The youngest of the Three Princess was valued by guests with her culture of a talented woman. If you abide by Joga's words, it was even said that you can pass the civil examinations.

"I won't bother stopping you if you have a personality like Pairin-nee. Pairin-nee is also impatient, but I want you to understand that your personalities are different. Maomao, you know better than me which of the two you are."

She understood what she was saying.

Most likely, it was about that.

"There is no personage whose heart doesn't change. If you are here, you'll even know as far as hate. What is the point of believing?"

Joga picked up the pipe again and quietly discarded the ashes inside. Then she stuffed it with tobacco leaves and lit it with the brazier.

The white smoke engulfed her.

"After all, I am a harlot, and you are the child of one."

That's reality.

Maomao looked at the ashes that fell onto the brazier and knitted her brows slightly.

“Neechan, aren’t you smoking a little too much?”

“It’s fine once in a while. Civil officials with honest faces hate women smoking.”

Let me do what I want when there are no guests around at least – Joga blew smoke into the sky.

Chapter 10

White Snake Fairy, Part 1

It started from the story from a certain guest.

“It’s no wonder that I thought there are fewer guests lately.”

Meimei-nee-chan was lying down slovenly as she was setting up stones on the Go board. Her kamuro was looking over that, placing down stones as she agonised over it. They were playing the zhenlong. (*珍龍. A Go problem. From the Wuxia novel 天龍八部 “Demi-gods and Semi-devils”, where it’s a formation that even masters of the game were unable to solve, until the monk Xuzhu (one of the three protagonists) does it serendipitously 30 years later).*

“The very important ministers like unusual things after all.”

The one who said that, while puffing out smoke, was Joga.

Maomao had prepared for moxibustion by her sisters’ asking. As the two’s womanly paths were heavy, sometimes they relieved themselves by stimulating their pressure points like this.

She was told that was what Meimei’s Go opponent had told her yesterday. That there was a fairy-like maiden who was more unusual than the Three Princesses of the Rokushoukan.

“We are at the age where they would be getting sick and tired of us. Even though we were treated like jewels of admiration in times past.”

Keh, Joga spat. “Yeah sure,” Maomao made sounds of listening, making Joga lie down and lit the moxa she placed on the woman’s skin. Hearing the sexy “Haaaaah~” and the curling of toes, she wanted to say that there’s still a while to go.

“Somehow, according to him, she has pure white hair. If it’s just that, he should have just said that she has normal white hair then.”

Also, it seems her eyes are red, Meimei added.

(White hair and red eyes.)

That is unusual, Maomao nodded. She prepared Meimei's moxibustion after Joga's.

Meimei stretched a slender leg out from her clothes. Maomao carefully rolled her dress up so it wouldn't get burnt, and place the moxa on her leg and lit it.

"Hair aside, her eyes are also red huh. Would that make her an albino then?"

"That seems to be the case."

Her older sisters hummed in agreement. The kamuro who was holding the Go stone didn't understand at all; she tugged at Maomao's sleeves. It was the girl who had shrieked when she saw Jinshi eating the locusts the other day. If Maomao remembered correctly, the girl's name is Zuurin[[note](#)]梓琳, Zi Lin.[/[note](#)].

Maomao squinted in annoyance, but when she saw Zuurin act scared, she reluctantly opened her mouth.

"It's rare for humans, but children can be born with no colour. Their hair and skin are both white, and their eyes looked red as the blood inside are transparent. Those are called albino."

It also exists in animals. White snakes and foxes are revered as auspicious gods, but what about humans? She was told that distant foreign countries – believing that white skinned children are a panacea – have a custom of eating them. However, that story is false. Though their hair and skin are white, that is just a difference in colour, and their insides are no different, is what Maomao was taught by her dad Ruomen.

Maomao had caught a white snake once, but she had really thought that was a mysterious creature.

It seems that, this time, the albino was being worshipped as a curious fairy.

"Even though the big-shots will get tired of her sooner or later."

“About that.”

Meimei said as she stretched out her other leg.

“The story is that she actually uses sage arts.”

At those words, Maomao’s brows twitched.



She was told that the fairy used the power to read minds and to create gold.

It’s a story that made one want to smear spit on their brows [note]To be wary of trickery. Something you do to not be bewitched by a fox or tanuki.[/note], but it was what whimsical people took strong interests in. In the beginning, it was said the fairy had performed in a small exhibition hut, but she was now renting the theatre of the capital.

Since the exhibition that gathered the wealthy opened once per night, the grumbling of the courtesans of the pleasure district would also have to be unreasonable. Considering that the wealthy guests had shown up after a long time, it was unamusing because they were praising the inhuman appearance of the fairy and admiring her ability.

At the twenty percent decrease in profits than the usual, even the madam was hurling down the pipe. The guests coming in for the middle-ranked courtesans stayed the same, but the Rokushoukan is a high-class brothel. With the upper guests hardly coming in, the proceeds changed greatly.

“It’s an exhibition. Seeing it once should be good enough.”

“It’s nothing like that.”

It was the head manservant, Ukyou, who responded to Maomao’s monologue. This man, who is before his forties, must be having it rough from taking care of Chou’u and Sazen recently. It seems he finally got the break before he raised the lanterns of the night shop. He was eating a large steamed meat bun.

Maomao took the opportunity to give him insipid tea. “scuse me,” Ukyou said, taking

the teacup and pouring tea into it.

“You know about alchemy[[note](#)]鍊丹術, more specifically Chinese alchemy, literally “the art of transmuting cinnabar”[/[note](#)], right?”

“Why this so suddenly?”

Alchemy. The art of creating medicine that turns one into an unageing, undying immortal. Having heard such a thing from her dad, there would be no way Maomao’s eyes wouldn’t shine. And then, she immediately remembered getting stabbed with nails.

“Don’t copy that.”

Ruomen had said.

In other words, it was that kind of immensely suspicious art.

“Is this a story of wanting to share the luck of the power of immortality?”

“Who knows. It goes without saying that there’s her unusual appearance, but I heard that she could read people’s minds.”

“Hohoh.”

The big shots who turned up with spit on their brows, what would they think of having their minds seen through? From undermining their feelings by playing them as fools, she might become a figure of worship.

And they might think the thing called the elixir of life is real.

(As if such an idiotic thing exists.)

Maomao knew about the person who created the medicine of resurrection on the eve of his research on immortality medicine. Even though he was an outstanding as a medical officer, from the side effect, there was no shadow of what he was left now.

Maomao clenched her fist. She understood that lamenting that if she had his knowledge, they could create a proper counterplan against the locust plague, was something that couldn’t be helped.

The disaster was still on its way. That might change depending on what they will do from now on.

Even though Jinshi's people were puzzling over the countermeasures for the disaster that will possibly occur hereafter, she sighed at the other big shots who were relaxing too much.

Though, Maomao got interested in that art.

"Is it that in other words? That fairy, is she gathering her audience with the elixir of life as the pull?"

"I don't know that much. I only heard it from the officials' followers."

In saying that, Ukyou threw the steamed bun into his mouth and washed it down with the rest of the tea.

It was time to light the lanterns.

"If you're interested, how about you go see it?"

"I can't pay for such an expensive show."

"Then, why don't you earnestly ask somebody?"

Ukyou said, skilfully winked his right eye, and hurried away.

(Who could I ask?)

Maomao spat out a *keh* as one face occurred to her, as a matter of course.



Even though it would be easier if he said that it was impossible since he's busy.

When she tried voicing it out a little, he became exaggeratedly eager. Far from that, it seems the exhibition had already reached Jinshi's ears, so he was interested.

She was told to quickly prepare to leave.

Maomao thought that as she put on her outer garment. It was given by the clothing shop, a first-class padded garment. The colours were a little flashy, but it was a waste to take what she was given and set it aside. And it was a waste to not use it.

She dressed warmly and went out. A horse-drawn carriage awaited.

It was already dark out. Wet snow was falling from the sky. When she informed Chou'u, he got noisy about bringing him along, so she had Ukyou make him eat dinner.

“Shall we head off?”

Gaoshun said. When she went inside, there was Jinshi wearing a mask.

Maomao slowly lowered her head, and sat on the seat by his signal to sit.

“Jinshi-sama, will you be going with a mask?”

“Yeah.”

Maomao made a dubious expression.

In response to that, Jinshi's expression was calm.

“It's fine. It shouldn't be a problem.”

He said and the carriage moved.



The theatre with the fairy was said to be a little to the east of the middle of the capital. It was in the location that prospered the most in the capital, which had rows of shops, so it was close to the exclusive residential district.

This place was normally the centre of where the plays are performed, so it was mysterious to have it hold the fairy's solo performance.

(What a mundane fairy.)

The fairy, from her appearance, is called Lady Pai. (TL: 白娘々, *Pai-nyan'nyan*, *Bai-*

niangniang in Chinese. The White Lady. 娘々: nyan'nyan [niangniang in Chinese] is a title of reverence for females, normally used for goddesses, empresses and consorts, meaning 'mother').

They descended from the carriage. It already had lines of many people. The reception man accepted the money, and briskly led them inside.

(I see huh.)

“There isn’t a problem, right?”

Maomao understood that Jinshi was making a triumphant expression even under a mask. Half the audience around them were wearing masks or veils. Even Maomao was wearing a veil on her head – Gaoshun had brought it, putting where he got it from aside.

If it was the case that the wealthy big shots enjoy seeing this sort of thing, it could be seen as that they were making a bit too much merry. Otherwise, this could be something like an amusement festival. She felt like she was drowning in that questionable atmosphere.

There was a stage inside the theatre and several tens of tables before it. The ceiling was open so you can watch from the second floor. You can put in more than a hundred people in one go.

The building in the inner palace was a construction that was a lot larger, but the design here allowed everyone to see the theatre. That being the case, the design carved into the pillars and beams were detailed and beautiful.

A large lantern dangled down from the ceiling. They walked in relying on its dim lighting.

The place Jinshi sat, was the seat on the second row of the left side from the stage. Directly in front of them and right in the middle, was a well-built man and a young maiden who were sitting and being waited upon.

“Sorry. I couldn’t get the seats in the middle.”

The one who said it regretfully, was the young man who had joined up with them before she realised. From his voice, even with his mask on, she knew it to be Basen.

The table was for four. Including Gaoshun, it was just enough.

“No, rather, it would be better if it was further back.”

It was Gaoshun who said that. Certainly, no matter if you wore a mask, if you take up the good seats, it is easy to imagine the extent of the person’s power and fortune.

Judging from appearances, the man in the middle seat could only look like the nouveau rich who had money in excess. If she was not mistaken, wasn’t the trade dealer who’s swaggering around in the pleasure district recently that kind of man?

As soon as they sat down, female servants who were smiling showed up carrying sake cups.

Maomao sniffed it.

“It’s wine. You’re not drinking?”

She liked wine. However, she wanted to look at the Lady Pai or whoever with sober eyes.

“I’ll partake it later. So do you want me to food taste?”

“No, it’s fine.”

Jinshi also put the cup on the table like he was copying her. If he did so, Gaoshun and Basen had no choice but to do the same. As far as she saw from those around her, the wine in the cups seemed very delicious. While thinking pitifully that she should drink it, Maomao eyed the stage.

The dim interior was cloaked in white mist. And, along with the crash of the gong, the star of the stage appeared from the inside like she was releasing light.

It was a maiden with white clothes and white skin. Her white hair was untied, trailing behind her. Amid the pure white colouring, her red dyed lips and her pair of eyes were the only things that stood out.

As the gong reverberated, Lady Pai stood at the centre of the stage. There was a single beautiful table prepared on it.

The maiden went to it. She displayed the paper that has been prepared on the table beforehand. Drawn there was the current arrangement of the tables and the stage.

When she did so, a man clad in white appeared on the platform. His hair was black, but aside from that, from his appearance that matched with Lady Pai, Maomao understood that he was the maiden's follower.

The man received that arrangement diagram from the maiden and pasted it on the wall on the platform. And then he threw something towards it.

Could it be a type of throwing weapon? The long and narrow thing went through the paper and was embedded into the wall. As the wall was papier mache that had been prepared beforehand, it was immediately pierced through.

"Well then, the guest sitting on this seat is-"

A hole was opened in the paper.

It was right exactly on the left side, the seats on the second row from the front.

"It's here yeah."

"It's here yes."

In other words, the seats Maomao and the others were sitting on.

"What do we do?"

"Even you ask what do we do."

Jinshi didn't seem to want to stand out.

Gaoshun also wasn't at the age to be in high spirits from that.

Speaking of Basen...

He was slightly fidgety. *I want to go out for a bit, but suggesting myself is also that*, that kind of expression. Just as much as he is too serious, he can't be honest about that kind of thing, it seems.

However, at this rate, if no one is going, then it can't be helped—

“Then, I'll...”

“You go.”

Jinshi said. He was pointing at Maomao.

“Isn't this a chance to see it up close?”

“...”

Basen, who was about stand up beside her, was a little stumped. Right now, Maomao was on the verge of wanting to throw the ball over to him, but she didn't have that kind of personality either.

“I'll go then.”

She said, giving a sidelong glance to Basen who dejectedly hung his head, and went up on the platform.

Lady Pai was more dazzling under the flickering lantern light. Her overly white skin exposed her transparent veins. Maomao understood that it was different to just painting your skin white.

“From one to ten, can you pick your favourite number?”

She heard a delicate voice that seemed to vanish. As if to supplement the maiden, the man beside her repeated her words in a loud voice.

“Write it down so I can't see it. Please also fold it down into a small piece so no one can see it.”

Lady Pai and the man both turned around. That moment, Maomao smoothly wrote the character with the brush that had been handed to her. The brush had been filled with ink beforehand, so it was a little hard to write with. The feel of the brush was also a little bad, so they might have used mediocre ink. There was a mat underneath so she won't get it on the table.

When she was done with writing down the number, Maomao folded it up.

“I’m done.”

When she said it, Lady Pai and the man turned around. The man pushed a strange cart over this time. In exchange, the previous table was moved to the back of the stage.

There was a box with the bases of several strange tubes stuck to it. Ten vertical, ten horizontal, a total of a hundred tubes.

“Can you cram that paper into one of them?”

Lady Pai said, then turned around with the man again.

Even if they didn’t specially turn around, the audience wouldn’t be able to see from the stage either.

Maomao crunched up the paper to an even smaller size and stuffed it into a tube. The paper was soft, but the width of the tube she stuffed it into was narrow, so she had some trouble.

After she was done, she covered it with a thin gauze at the top to obscure it.

When she did so, the man moved that again. The box that packed with tubes was placed on a different table on the side of the stage. As if the gauze was thin and light, it fluttered airily.

“I’m done.”

Just as she said that, the gong reverberated. Though her eyes widened at the shock, she felt grateful she was wearing a veil.

However, as if Jinshi noticed that somehow, she got that his shoulders were shaking from his faraway seat.

How very irritating.

Lady Pai smiled and presented her hand.

Maomao, as she was told, put out her hand and the maiden's cold white hand took Maomao's wrist.

The bell rang this time.

Lady Pai stared at Maomao.

(Ah, this person.)

Her eyes are bad, Maomao thought. Her eyes moved strangely sometimes. Which reminds her, since there was no pigment in her eyes, compared to others, there must be a lot of aspects she would have to be impaired in.

When she thought that...

"The number written is seven."

"!?"

"Correct."

Her red lips curved into a grin. Together with her red eyes, Maomao was reminded of the white snake she caught a long time ago.

When she was going to broil the red eyed and white skinned snake, her dad got angry at her. *They are the god's messengers, so you can't*, she was told, but Maomao knew they aren't really that kind of creature. Her dad, even though the white skin they possess were unrelated to gods, he occasionally carried out that moral outlook so it was troubling.

She felt like she was getting absorbed into those round red eyes, when the gong sounded again.

Maybe because she was being shrouded by the haze around her, it was strangely warm and her head strangely hurt.

She abruptly felt irritated by the sensation that was like mosquitos buzzing around her ear, and Lady Pai opened her mouth again.

"Third from the top, second from the left."

“ ..”

“How is it?”

The man grabbed hold of the gauze, so the audience could see the contents of the box. And then from the inside, he took the tube that was third from the top and second from the left, and thrust a thin stick through it.

When he did so.

Paper came out from inside. The man opened up the finely folded paper, there was the number ‘7’ written clearly on it.

It goes without saying that it was what Maomao had written.

Chapter 11

White Snake Fairy, Part 2

Maomao returned to her seat wondering what could have happened.

Cheers erupted around her. Everyone's voices were merry as though they were tipsy.

Only Jinshi's group was patiently waiting for Maomao's return.

"Hey, what was that?"

"Even if you ask me what."

The one asking her in rapt attention was Basen.

"Don't tell me. You got bribed with money?"

Leave out the rude matters, Maomao thought. As Gaoshun's fist descended immediately, Basen was silent.

"I didn't take anything."

Maomao opened up her palms and showed them the inside of her sleeves too.

"Did someone see you?"

"No."

There were only Lady Pai and her male helper on the platform. They didn't see the character nor what tube she had put it in as it got covered with a cloth, so they couldn't have known.

(Don't tell me...)

Maomao suddenly looked at the platform. The lantern hung down from the ceiling, red

tassel swinging.

If there had been a mirror, by any chance, Maomao had thought that they could have seen the character she had written, but that was wrong. It seems hard to attach something like that to the ceiling, and above all, they would require another mirror to reflect it. With that much haze, and in the dim lighting, the mirror would also end up getting foggy. Even if they didn't use a bronze mirror but an imported high-grade mirror instead, they still shouldn't be able to see it.

And above all, that Lady Pai seemed to have poor vision.

She should only see it without getting blurry beyond one shaku.

She speculated how it could be for that case, and the next event began.

There was a new table with various tools on it on the platform.

Lady Pai picked up a small, thin piece of metal from the table. She also prepared a different plate. The male helper took the piece of metal and plate, placed it on a tray and went around the theatre. The piece of metal was polished – it merely looked like a plain piece of copper. The plate was deep so the liquid inside wouldn't spill.

Of course, there was no time for him to go around all the way up to the second floor. Sounds of discontent could be heard above from here and there. Since this is the difference of seating price, give it up.

Lady Pai took the piece of metal and plate from the man who came back. And then, she put the metal on the plate and before Maomao noticed, that plate was sitting over a prepared flame.

When Lady Pai put that in there, she started to chant something like a spell and dance. In the hazy dim room, her entire body looked like it was glowing.

After the Lady finished dancing, she picked up the chopsticks and took out the piece of metal. She displayed it.

(The colour changed.)

The reddish colour of copper had changed to silver.

The people nearby raised cheers. "Ohhh!"

"It changed from copper to silver!"

"You serious!?"

The people far away could not see, but after they saw the reactions of the other people, they started to bring themselves forward. The guards would stop them from going up to the stage. They should know that they cannot get that close.

The Lady washed the metal with some liquid and wiped it with a cloth. And then, she put it directly on the flame this time.

The cheers got louder.

"The silver turned to gold!"

The silver changed to shimmering gold this time.

The Lady shook it with the chopsticks, and as it radiated heat, she placed it on the plate. So they could see properly, the man went around to show everyone the board that was shining gold.

"...can you explain this?"

Jinshi said as he crossed his arms.

"Afterwards. Can I enjoy the entertainment first?"

Maomao said as her eyes glittered. Honestly, she had thought that it would be waste to look away.

Even if the maiden isn't a fairy, she had that much merit.



After that, Lady Pai performed several interesting shows.

She placed a wet rock on paper. She chanted a spell, and a moment later it burst into flames.

As she wondered where the butterflies came out from nowhere, they flew and burnt away into ashes.

All the audiences cheered. And in the final act—

The Lady brought over a shining silver fluid.

As everyone had their attention on that mysterious liquid, the maiden poured it into a small cup and drank it all down.

“!?”

Without thinking, Maomao was about to get up.
However, as she was half up, she stopped and watched her.

“Did you enjoy this night as well?”

The Lady smilingly descended from the platform and left.

Inside the theatre in the lingering heat, the audiences delightfully talked about what just happened. Some people carried fire in their eyes, and some looked at the place where the fairy was in worship.

However, only four people, Maomao included, were not that excited.

“It doesn’t feel extraordinary.”

Jinshi finally reached out for the wine cup.

“Jinshi-sama.”

Maomao reflexively stopped his hand.

“That’s rude.”

Basen watched in disapproval.

“Food taste?”

Jinshi put down the cup.

“Yes.”

Maomao picked up the cup in front of her. She smelled it, and placed a drop on her skin. After watching for the reaction, she tasted it with the tip of her tongue.

“...I don’t know clearly, but I feel the arousal effect is a little strong.”

There was little alcohol content. It was easy to drink as it was close to fruit juice, but there was a trace of a different complex taste. It was a mixture of several types. She understood that there was a bit of salt mixed in it.

“I think it’s not a poison.”

However, it will enhance the effect comparative to the concentration of alcohol content. It was just that.

Besides...

The swinging lantern.

The dim room.

The mysterious haze and wondrous fairy.

The unfathomable phenomenon occurring before your eyes.

(Oh hey there.)

Would this be a sufficient reason for anyone to accept it blindly?

And, what proportion of the people in this theatre turned out like this?

While thinking good gracious, Maomao sipped the wine.

(It really is a little salty.)

It was the instant she thought that it would be tasty if they didn't add salt.

“!?”

Maomao suddenly stuck her finger in the cup. And then, she glided the fruit wine-like ink across the table.

“What are you doing?”

“So it's something like this huh.”

Not long after she answered Jinshi's question, Maomao looked around.

(If it's something like that, there would be some trick in addition to that.)

She regretted that she should have looked around more when she was standing on the stage when possible. Could there be something over there?

The haze was thicker than anywhere else. It was hot. Her head ached. And strangely, her ability to concentrate was inhibited.

(Haze.)

Could that steam, possibly? Could that be vapour coming out from the back of the stage?

If so, she also understood the cause of the heat.

Then, the headache.

The sensation was as if there were mosquitos buzzing.

What could that be?

(Mm?)

When she thought *could it be*, she glanced at Lady Pai who was at the back of the stage.

Maomao stuck her fingers in her mouth, puckered her lips, and blew.

“What, you blowing a whistle or something?”

Basen squinted and watched Maomao.

The sound wasn’t that loud. People were talking loudly around her. She shouldn’t have heard from this distance.

And yet, Lady Pai’s shoulders shook with surprise and she seemed to look around.

(Ahh, so it’s something like that huh.)

Maomao grinned, and then suggested, *Shall we go outside?*



It was cold outside. If possible, she wanted to go inside the nearby restaurant and talk, but it was hard while wearing masks. It can’t be helped, she decided to talk inside the carriage.

It was also fine to return to the Rokushoukan and talk there, but the three seemed to want to know what’s what as soon as possible.

Maomao decided to first explain how the copper was changed into silver and into gold.

“That is very similar to something called the Art of Yellow and White[note]黄白術[/note].”

Would it be easier to understand if she said alchemy? Gunpowder is another thing that is made in accordance to that.

The Art of Yellow and White was among that – the changing of base metals into precious metals.

Alchemy is an art for the prolonging of the human lifespan, but in reality, there are a

lot of counterfeits. An emperor from antiquity was left in the records as one who sought perpetual youth and longevity, so much so that he lost his life from an erroneous method.

It was certainly similar, but, speaking of which-

"I feel it is closer to the alchemy[^{note}錬金術, the Art of Transmuting Gold[/note] of the West."

"The West?"

"Yes."

Maomao nodded at Jinshi's question.

"I've only it from my dad's stories, but this is actually the first time I've ever seen it. However, my dad has seen that in person many times, and understood the structure of it. Even if that did turn into silver, it didn't necessarily turn into gold. It is covered by plating, it seems to be just a transition to something else from warming over fire."

Maomao had tried it too, but her dad didn't teach her the essentials materials. Even if he taught her, there wouldn't be all the materials in the pharmacy.

"If you want to know the details, please ask Ruomen. And while you're at it, I'll be happy if you inform me what he tells you."

She said, her eyes gleaming.

In addition, the spontaneous burning of the paper too. There is the possibility if you use the by-product made from that process. And making the butterflies can also be taken as probable if they were made with good paper.

The people at that place had poor vision from the haze, and besides, they had drunk wine that induced drunkenness. Even Jinshi's group, who did not drink the wine, were tricked, so there shouldn't be people who would have noticed it.

By the way, the paper butterflies appeared to be a type of magic that is introduced in the island country in the east.

“Then, how did they see through your mind?”

“Even in regards to that.”

Maomao got Gaoshun to lend her two sheets of paper and a portable writing tool. She then layered the two sheets of paper and used an inky brush to write down ‘7’. After writing, she showed Jinshi and the others the paper that was underneath.

“What do you think?”

“What or this, wouldn’t that be a marking on the back?”

It’s fragmented, but the ‘7’ had clearly passed through.

“Yes, it’s something like so.”

“Even if it’s something like this, wouldn’t be found out if there were markings under the paper you wrote on?”

“Indeed, that’s true.”

There had been a black mat underneath the paper Maomao had written on. They wouldn’t be able to see the markings with that.

“But it went through.”

Maomao had dipped the brush with an ample amount of ink when she received it. She recalled the ink had been strangely cheap-looking and had a gravelly texture.

“What if there was something else contained within the ink-“

What about salt? That had been dissolved into the ink. To be used for writing on paper. The ink that oozed out from the thin and soft paper will soak into the black mat. What would happen once they dry that?

The salt that had been dissolved in the ink will dry and stand out.

Of course, salt was just an example, but if that’s the case, they would know what had been written.

“Then, how did they know which pipe was the paper placed in?”

“That, should be sound.”

“Sound?”

The sounds of bells and the gong echoed in that theatre.

However, that was one other important sound that had been hidden.

“When I was there, my head was hurting a lot. I believe there was probably a sound in a high level of frequency that I couldn’t perceive being emitted.”

High-frequency sounds hurt your ears. Even if she didn’t recognise it as sound, Maomao seemed have been feeling discomfort unconsciously.

“High-frequency sound?”

“Indeed.”

Maomao blew a whistle.

“Everyone should have heard this, right?”

“My ears ain’t bad.”

“Then, as for this-“

She tuned it so the sound was as high as she could make it. Jinshi and Basen had the usual expressions, but Gaoshun tilted his head for an instant.

“Heard that.”

“I heard that.”

“...I heard that, certainly.”

Gaoshun’s reply was a little delayed.

“That’s a relief. Since it gets harder to hear as you age.”

Gaoshun froze up.

He believed that he was still young, but his body was nonetheless getting old.

“People, have their own different high ranges of frequency they can hear.”

There are differences even within the those with the same age. Just like how there are good and bad for vision, it is also the same for hearing.

Also, she cannot make a postulation, but there are also case where those with bad vision are compensated with good hearing.

“That fairy’s hearing must have been very sensitive.”

She had reacted to Maomao’s whistle from far away in the clamour.

She must have always trained to hear apart the notes of the flutes.

Therefore, there mustn’t have been a kind of flute in the musical instruments in that theatre.

End-blown flutes and transverse flutes both have holes, so when you press those down, the pitch of the sound can be changed. Suppose that the one hundred pipes that had been struck into that box had changes in the hole of the pipe. If Maomao jammed the paper tightly into the pipe, it would be same as pressing down on the holes of the flute.

“So you’re saying, she understood which one it was from recognising the one hundred sounds that passed through? How would that be blown? By taking that the box as the substitute for a flute?”

“There is also that possibility, but there’s a more reliable method.”

The sound of the gong and the bells. With those as the signal, what if they blew the flute ten times? Since they were covered with a cloth on top, there wouldn’t be an issue even if there was the male helper close by. If the man managed the passage that air goes in from the side of the box.

Even if she didn't learn the one hundred sounds, there will be no problems if she could tell apart ten notes.

"And, regarding how they were blown, you get the explanation from that haze."

The haze was steam, supposing that there was hot water being boiled from somewhere.

How would be if that steam entered from under the desk? Everyone would only be focusing on above the table, they won't go as far as to see the structure of the table underneath.

"Do you understand with that?"

"Yeah."

Jinshi and the others nodded.

Only Gaoshun was staring off into the distance as he rubbed his own ears.

"And lastly..."

Maomao gave an explanation regarding the silver liquid Lady Pai had drunk at the end.

"That is a deadly poison. So that no one will copy her, is it fine if you make an opportunity to explain it to the high officials?"

Maomao said to Jinshi with a serious look.



Even if she said one word and didn't say more, Jinshi was capable that he was able to do as far as two or three.

Despite that, the other person seemed to be several steps higher.

Several days after Lady Pai's stage, the maiden disappeared without a trace.

Instead, what remained was the incident of mysterious deaths from ingesting poison

among the merchants of the capital.

What had she wanted to achieve?

That fairy that was like a white snake.

Leaving behind that puzzle, she disappeared.



In the days of old, the powers that be had all sought for the elixir of life. On that occasion, they took the water-like silver that was both a metal and a liquid as medicine.

Without even thinking that they would shorten their lifespan as a consequence.

That water-like silver, as it is, is referred to as quicksilver_(mercury).

At that time, Maomao had wondered what would happen to Lady Pai who had drunk the liquid silver as it is. Mercury, in its liquid state, is none other than a deadly poison if not excreted by the body. When it becomes vapour and is inhaled, it becomes a serious poison once the state changes when it adheres to other things.

It is sometimes used as a medicine. Poison or medicine is dependant upon the way it is used.

As Maomao looked at the vivid scarlet of the cinnabar, she gently packed it up into the medicine shelves.

Chapter 12

Calico Cat

Mercury is passed down as a wonder drug of immortality due to its curious properties.

You make mercury by cooling down the vapour you get from heating up its ingredient – a vermillion rock that can be used as a pigment and as a drug.

From the fact that it becomes flowing silver after becoming gas, the rock that gives the impression of crimson blood is said to be believed by the ancient people to contain eternal life.

It is said the ancient people, but there are not few people nowadays who also believe that mystery.

There would be ignorant people who, when they are shown the mysterious change of state, will fall into believing in it utterly. There are many cases where the traders handling the drug will make its recipe a secret. If that can be a source of profit, that would be quite natural.

Even Maomao, if she hadn't been taught by her dad, would drink the mercury in the name of experiment.

From the fact that the Lady Pai in question had suppressed the news, she knew that some people will try to do it.

At least, Maomao understood that the maiden had wanted to throw the capital into confusion. The wealthy merchants had died from consuming poison, but it was likely that they were copying Lady Pai by ingesting mercury. The toxicity of mercury changes depending on its state. If she displayed herself drinking it before their eyes like that, they would think that they would be no harm to themselves if they drank it too.

(Did she want to stir up trouble in society?)

Those kinds of people also exist. However, there are many fanciful jerks who get enjoyment from the sight of panicking people. If there are fellows who cut at people

just because they just wanted to do so, there are also people who give poisoned buns to beggars under the pretence of charity.

However, the other party was bad. Given how she had purposely tried to pretend and circulate that she is a fairy to wealthy merchants and high officials. And as a result, there were fatalities.

(What was her aim? And besides-)

Alchemy (鍊丹術), no, from the flow of events, it was closer to western alchemy (鍊金術). Maomao was also curious about that. Since the maiden also had a show where she used eastern paper, it would be the end of it if she just said the maiden is from a nomadic race, but-

That alchemy is a western thing. She had a thought regarding that.

Maomao was bothered by it, but thinking about that wasn't her job. The settlement of the Shi Clan, the counter-measure of the locust plague – Jinshi must be busy with various things, but it would be correct to leave this kind of thing to him. However, it would be the loss of the interest and the principal if he died from overwork.

She had no idea if he's the actual younger brother or whatever, but the emperor is also working him considerably hard. It can't be helped if that's his duty, but it's as if...

(As if he's grooming a successor...)

And she abandoned the thought right here.

Currently, the crown prince is the imperial prince that Consort, no, Empress Gyokuyou has given birth to. And above all, Consort Rifa has also given birth to a male infant.

The emperor is only halfway in his thirties, a great man who is still healthy. If there are no issues until the crown prince grows up, they would be going strong.

Let's not think about tumultuous matters. Considering even sweeping as a change of mood, she opened the door of the pharmacy.

When she did so, she saw a drab old man tottering around. It was a plump old man that she recognised.

The old man waved his hands exaggeratedly when he noticed Maomao. There was a large cloth bundle on his back, and he was carrying a basket in his hands.

“Lasssssss.”

The one waving his hands exaggeratedly was the quack doctor who should be in the inner palace.

(Why is he here?)

As she held onto that question, Maomao opened the entrance to the pharmacy.



“Goodness gracious, I thought that I had made a mistake with the address I heard from Ruomen-san.”

The quack sighed deeply and wiped away his sweat. It seems, due to his fat, he heats up quickly when he runs a little even in winter.

Maomao handed out the tea that she purposely cooled down, and the quack downed it in one gulp.

“By the way, why here?... Ah, don’t worry about it.”

How pitiful, has he finally been dismissed? He certainly isn’t a bad person, but since wage theft is also a good part for it, it couldn’t be helped, right?

It would also be difficult for a former eunuch to get a new job, but when she thought of being kind for as much as she could–

“Lass, aren’t you mistaken about something?”

The quack stared at her with narrowed eyes.

“No, don’t worry about it. Please say that kind of matter without being ashamed.”

“No, really.”

As they argued back and forth like that, there was a swoosh of something moving.

What is it, she thought, when the basket the quack doctor was carrying moved. And then—.

“Nyaa.”

There was a high pitched cry.

“...is that a cat?”

“Yeah, that’s a cat.”

“Why this again?”

The quack took out the cat from the basket. It was a young calico cat. Its peach-coloured paw pads were raised up in a celebratory gesture as if to show Maomao.

“I can’t raise it in the inner palace.”

“So you got chased out due to something like this.”

“No, I told you it’s not that.”

The quack doctor puckered his lips and shook his head. The calico cat, as if lured by that, kicked its hind legs.

The quack doctor returned the cat to the basket and gave it a small fish snack.

“About that, I was allowed to return to my hometown after a long time.”

“Hohoh, are you finally sent back to your village?”

“Lass, are you saying this on purpose?”

Well then, the talk won’t proceed with this, so she decided to keep silence for now.

As Ruomen had returned to the imperial court, it seems the quack doctor was given a

short break. Ruomen didn't work in the inner palace, but she was told there was an arrangement for him to stay in the inner palace for as long as the quack wasn't around. Of course, the rules where there must be court physicians in the medical office, meant that the quack had no breaks for a long time as the inner palace didn't have other physicians.

At the uncouthness here, it was Maomao's kindness that she didn't add, "Weren't you always playing around?"

Well then, about that is up with this cat-.

"This one, you know, is the moment I got out of the imperial court."

She was told that he met children who told him to "Please take the cat." From their appearances, they seemed to be good kids, an older sister and a young brother, but it looked like they were secretly keeping the kitten without their parents knowing.

However, they had been discovered by the servants, and it seems they had to end up abandoning the kitten in a far away place as it is. If that's the case, he was told that they were looking for a pet owner who can take care of it properly.

So that's how it is. Everyone who serves in the imperial court must be wealthy to a certain degree. And furthermore, as they avoided the hard-to-please civil officials and the stern military officials, they must think that it was a blessing when a nonchalant old man with a loach moustache came by.

The quack is a softy inside and outside.

"Those kids were bad, but since it's impossible for me to take her into the inner palace, I thought of bringing her home. Since my younger sister likes cats."

The quack doctor seemed happy at the expectations that he will be returning home after ten-odd years. If she remembered properly, the quack doctor's home makes paper and also send the goods to the imperial court. It might be good to have a lookout so mice don't chew on the paper.

"Is that so?"

However, the journey seems long. It was when she thought, *I wonder if the cat can stay*

docile?

The lid of the basket slid to the side, and the cat leapt out.

“Ahh. Maomao [毛毛, *Mao Mao (using no caps to differentiate between our heroine))!*”

“What is with that name!”

“No, that’s what the children named it.”

The cat with an immensely unpleasant name slipped through the gap of the pharmacy door and ran for the entrance of the Rokushoukan.

Maomao and the quack doctor hastily put on their shoes and chased after the cat.

It went through the slovenly women who had taken their morning baths, passed between the legs of the manservant who was tidying up the cushions in the room. Its destination was the dining hall.

“Mm?”

Chou’u was gulping down food on the table. The mute little girl, Zuurin, was slurping congee next to him.

“What’s this guy?”

As he chewed on his chopsticks, Chou’u peered at the calico cat. Zuurin blinked at the cat with round eyes.

The cat plopped its forelegs on Chou’u’s foot.

“Could it be this?”

Chou’u picked up his fish with his chopsticks. It was a blueback fish that was only just roasted under charcoal fire, but it tasted salty even without added flavouring.

“Nya!”

The cat knocked down Chou’u’s fish.

“Ah!”

The fish fell tragically onto the dirt floor. The cat gobbled it up.

“maomao. You can’t do that.”

The quack doctor turned up out of breath.

“What is with this cat! Who are you, old man?”

And... He said.

“maomao or whatever, what is with that name?”

Chou’u smirked as he looked at Maomao. Zuurin also laughed silently.

Maomao got sullen and caught the calico cat for now. The cat was holding onto the fish in its mouth, showing no sign of letting go.

Though Chou’u looked at the fish in disappointment, he looked at the cat in amusement. “Ohh!” his eyes shone every time he prodded at its squishy flushed peach-coloured paw pads.

As for Maomao, she quickly gave it back to the quack doctor and wanted to have him deliver it home. However, there must be some reason that the quack doctor had come here.

For now, she decided to leave it to the kids, directing them to not let the cat escape. Just in case, she called for a manservant, so they won’t do bad things like that.

They returned to the pharmacy, and when she asked what was the main topic of the conversation, the quack doctor started to speak as he fidgeted with his moustache.

“So you know that my family makes paper.”

“Yes.”

“Actually, I’m going back this time because there’s something a little concerning that’s happening there.”

Previously, the quack's sister had sent a letter saying that the quality of paper got worse. That should have already been settled, but could a new issue have presented itself?

"What does it say in the letter?"

"No, she told me that she wanted me to return home personally."

Hmhm. I see, Maomao nodded.

"And so, I want lass to come along with me for a bit..."

No doubt the quack had written grandiosely in his reply to his sister before. This minister, he's a wimp, but he has the tendency to show his good points as it is.

In other words, he seems he had no confidence in whether he can produce his reply promisingly after hearing the story.

"..."

She was sorry for the quack doctor, but Maomao didn't have that much sense of duty. As far as breaking on the job, she had no reason to follow him.

Seeing the Maomao's indifferent attitude, the quack clung to her as his eyes teared up.

"La-lass, for mercy's sake. It's not that far. It won't take more than half a day by carriage from here."

Nonetheless, she would have to close the pharmacy for three days at least. Besides, with spring coming, she wanted to till the fields.

And above all, there is another person that won't allow with that reason.

"Oh my, that would be troubling."

Showing up as if she had arranged it beforehand, leaning against the wall, was the dried goods, er, the madam.

"This child, pretty much, works as the pharmacy here. Since we have nothing like a

doctor here, it would be the worse case if she's impudently nowhere to be found."

The crone said as she gnawed on a cuttlefish she took out from somewhere.

"Don't say that."

Even the quack doctor would want to preserve the dignity of an older brother.

"Even if you say that huh."

The crone's eyes flickered away as she said that.

(Ah.)

Maomao realised the madam's intention. She was probably listening intently to their conversation from before. And furthermore, she must have seen that Maomao had been recently obtaining fine quality medicine wrapping paper free of charge.

"Gran, that reminds me, didn't you say that you wanted to replace the wallpaper recently?"

"Oh yah, I feel that it was something like that."

The crone unnaturally turned away as she gnawed on the cuttlefish.

"Also, didn't you say that there you don't have good paper even to send letters regularly?"

"Was it something like that."

Saying that, Maomao and the madam glanced at the quack doctor.

"Our paper is the highest quality. It can be wallpaper, letters or anything else."

The quack doctor said, clenching his fist.

"Just send only what you like."

As the madam turned away with those words, Maomao didn't overlook her grin.

She really is a miserly hag.

Chapter 13

Paper Village, Part 1

The quack's hometown was a village half-a-day south-west of the capital by horse-drawn carriage. She was told it was based at the foot of the mountains.

It was beyond the headwaters of the large river that divided the country into east and west. There was an irrigation channel alongside the river, but weed-like plants were growing on the fields.

When Maomao stared at it, the chatty quack explained to her.

"That's wheat."

"Wheat? The irrigation is done quite rigorously."

There are channels constructed around the fields. Does wheat require that much water? Maomao tilted her head.

At her feet was maomao, the cat with a distasteful name. It seemed to have had enough of being inside the basket, so it was purring on the quack's lap and peeking out the window.

"That is for rice farming use in the summertime. We produce rice and wheat. Two types a year here."

"I see."

"If it's rice, the soil won't get barren even if you produce other crops on the same plot of land."

From just producing crops twice a year, nutrients will be leached out from the soil. However, when it comes rice paddies, the water would carry over nutrients, so it would be hard for the soil to become barren.

Once they came out of the fields, she could see forests. There was a village in that

vicinity.

“The soil is quite fertile.”

She felt it was also fine to not make paper if it was that fertile, but could that part be wrong?

“When we moved here, the fields were already owned by other people. Because of that, they left the forest alone without looking towards it.”

She was told that as spring water flowed down from the nearby mountain, the forest has an abundance of trees growing that are the raw materials for paper. It was difficult to make large quantities of it, but they had succeeded in selling it in a high grade. The means of transportation was also convenient as the river was close by.

However, there was one thing she was interested in.

She locked eyes with a farmer who was treading the wheat.

Was there some resentment at the act of strengthening wheat? She felt the eyes looking this way were strangely sharp and gloomy.

Maomao pretended to not have noticed and continued making sounds of hearing to the quack doctor's talking.



When they reached the village, the person who came to greet them was an aunty in her forties. The softness of the corner of the eyes and the dropping of her brows was reminiscent of the quack. She must be the quack doctor's younger sister.

When she received the basket with the cat, she petted maomao with squinted eyes. They must have talked about it before.

“Oh my, older brother. Welcome home.”

“I'm back.”

The quack looked calm at a glance, but his eyes had slightly welled up with tears. It must be because he was back after several decades.

"I wish to visit the graves of Father and others."

They must have passed away while he couldn't leave the inner palace. The quack sniffled.

"Yes, I understand. That aside,"

The aunty glanced at Maomao.

"Who is this lass?"

She said as she tilted her head.



"Oh, is that so, an assistant? Then you should have told me earlier."

(Did I come as an assistant?)

The quack's sister said that. Though she had mentioned her name somehow, Maomao wasn't used to hearing it so she couldn't remember it, honestly. Yup, it can't be helped, so let's call her quack aunty.

The quack's face was accommodating, so he won't reject that part.

The quack younger sister steadily set down side dishes on the long table. They looked delicious. There was steamed river fish with herbs, steamed buns in the steamer, and fried rice that shone gold.

There was a mixture of congee and fish purposely given to maomao. maomao was a cat, and yet she was eating voraciously and shamelessly.

"I thought that there was no way you would bring back such a young bride despite you being a eunuch."

"Hahaha, there's no such thing."

"I know right."

The time the long table was set with lots of side dishes, the quack aunty's family showed up. There was a middle-aged man with a towel around his head, and two young men. The middle-aged man was the aunty's husband, and she was told the rest of them were her sons.

"Brother-in-law, long time no see."

The husband removed his head towel and reverently greeted the quack. The quack doctor smiled and replied, "It's been a while." Following the husband, one of the young men came to greet him. However, the other one sat in his seat, ignoring the quack, and started to devour his meal.

"Hey, what are you doing without greeting him!"

The aunty glared at her son.

"Elder brother..."

The other young man watched with an air of silence. This here must be the younger brother, and the one with the bad manners would have to be the older one.

The quack nephew-number-one split a steaming bun in half and popped it in his mouth. The insides had pork filling – Maomao drooled.

"Even if you show respect to uncle, isn't he a eunuch who hasn't come home for many years? Why would you call him after all this time? What's the point?"

At those words, the quack doctor gave his usual troubled smile with his brows lowered. He was used to being blatantly treated as a fool for being a eunuch, but it must be bitter to receive this treatment from his nephew.

Even Maomao got pretty sullen.

To this nephew only, no way was she going to let him eat delicious food. She plomped down on the seat,

"I'm sorry that it'll get cold, so thanks for the meal."

And stole away every bit of the dishes the nephew was about to take.

Aaahhhhhn, the youngster glaring at Maomao was something she didn't know. Maomao knew a manservant and a military official who was way bigger than this guy.

The aunty also seemed quite angry. She distributed congee and soup excluding her older son's share. The husband and her younger son ignored that, keeping clear of the gods.

Maybe he was angry at his family's attitude, the older son took another bun, and quickly left.

After he left the room, the husband lowered his head at the quack doctor as he scratched his head.

"Excuse him. He, doesn't know how much brother-in-law has worked for his village."

"It's okay. I'm fine. I'm used to this sort of thing."

The quack said as he scrumptiously slurped his congee.

The words that he was used to, the quack must have used it without thinking, but the quack aunty made a bitter expression at that.

Originally, the quack became a eunuch in exchange for not selling the quack aunty to the inner palace. Even though the quack's parents should have treasured their son more than their daughter.

"At any rate, wasn't there something you actually want to say before we eat?"

"..."

In response to the quack's words, the family became wordless.

Maomao was a listener either way, so she had no intentions to stop eating. The seasoning of the steamed fish was good; the herbs also work, it was delicious. She considered having to get the quack aunty to tell her the seasoning for it later.

The husband set down his chopsticks and looked at the quack.

And he slowly lowered his head.

“I heard that brother-in-law is a noted physician who only took up the child of the Son of Heaven. And that the Son of Heaven had directly requested for you.”

“Ha!?”

(Took up huh.)

The one who was taken up wasn't the quack, but Ruomen, but the quack must have exaggerated that part. Maomao still had kindness remaining to keep silent for him.

However.

The quack's brows drooped even lower, and he set down his chopsticks.

“It's beyond my position from him to hear my words.”

“You were also present at the favoured consort's childbirth?”

He was speaking absurdity. It was also limited for even high officials to be permitted to speak to him, and yet being disrespectful like talking directly, your head might roll. Maomao had been granted the chance to speak with the emperor several times, but any of those times were because the other had permitted so.

The consort was also no longer a consort, she had become the empress. As far as she had left the inner palace, it was also difficult to contact her.

At this rate, the quack doctor will be pressed down by the conversation even if it was unreasonable, so Maomao spoke on behalf of him.

“The court physician who had been in the inner palace before had been found fault with the work that wasn't his to blame, and was banished from the inner palace after bearing physical punishment.”

“!?”

“Rumours say that he imprudently knew of things that were better he didn't know, but

that was said to be the reason as well.”

It was about her dad, but it wasn’t a complete lie.

“Ugh,” the quack aunty’s face contorted. And then her shoulders drooped.

The quack, seeing that, waved his hands as he put himself forward.

“No, the Son of Heaven is impossible, but I might be able to talk to someone else. Please tell me about the matter.”

When he said that, the aunty and her husband exchanged glances. Maomao wondered if she was in the way by being here, but she had no idea what was the reason she had come along with the quack to not be in the conversation.

“This lass would be no problem. She can keep a secret.”

Unusually, the quack doctor read the atmosphere.

“In that case...”

He said, opening his mouth heavily.

It seems the village was on borrowed land from the start. They had been cheaply lent the land from the neighbouring landowner as he can’t use it, but the years they lived here lengthened and had progressed that it was better to buy it. The landowner from those times was a master with good character, and harmoniously gave it to be residents of this village.

Nevertheless, a couple of years ago, the talks changed when that landowner passed away and the son took over.

The new landowner was different to the previous generation, he hated people from other parts. And above that, he had a tendency to make fools of artisans, and he couldn’t stand that they became the purveyor to the imperial court by making paper, it seems.

In the time when the quality of the paper dropped previously, he came to this village many times to collect debt.

On the document, the previous landowner had passed over the land of the village and the forest twenty years ago. The amount of money was also specified, and the payment was smooth, but-

“One way or another, he came to attach faults, saying, that the yield of rice had decreased because you dirtied the water, or, that we can’t produce rice without sufficient water...”

Son-number-two said with a wince.

“And then, this time, it was worse than usual. Quickly cough up the money, and if you can’t then vacate this land, so he said.”

There were five years of payment left for until the deadline. Of course, to be told to play up five years’ worth of money in one go was impossible.

The other party was a rich family. Like how Maomao was no match for the madam, this side can’t leave on a grand scale either.

“If we were to leave, we’ll have to abandon our house and furniture. I don’t know how much time it will take to find a new place again.”

“The other party seems to be planning to buy our village as it is, and make paper themselves.”

“Why this again? They should be leaving *the mochi to the mochi shop* (every man to his trade).”

The quack said as he twirled his moustache.

The cat at his feet, who got nothing to do, saw that, and twitched its backside like it was going to jump.

“About that...”

The aunty said, shaking her head.

“The produce tax got suddenly raised this year.”

“Furthermore, in our case, since our tax was lowered since last year, they got even

more displeased.”

Hearing that, Maomao understood what kind of aim they were acting on.

She could see the anticipation that the lowering of the paper tax was because they want to spread paper in order to raise the literacy rate from here on.

Even regarding the tax of produce, this plot of land that produces two crops a year won't go as far as to fall into poverty even the tax got raised in terms of the yield. They must be considering reverse from here on.

(The countermeasure against the locust plague, I wonder.)

If they send crops produced from fertile land to land that has been ravaged by damage, that much starving people would decrease. She understood that it was Jinshi and the other's way of dealing with it, and she didn't think that was wrong, but it wasn't something for the people who got their taxes raised would bear with.

And, that point of the spear was aimed towards this village like so.

However, as the quack also mentioned, she wouldn't think they could make paper easily even if they obtained this village. It's exactly because that there was the know-how of the manufacturing process that they could make good quality paper.

“And moreover, troublingly, there's that guy.”

The “that guy” the husband had said must be about the bad mannered son from before.

“That guy, for some unknown reason, is siding with the farmers here.”

“Yeah, big brother is—”

The younger brother gave a strained laugh.

The quack doctor tilted his head, but Maomao guessed that it was probably about a girl.

“Embarrassingly, that guy had no schooling. He thinks that officials are all the same.”

And that's why he mixed up eunuchs with the officials who raised the tax and flared up at the quack.

"And the request is--"

Can you ask to lower the tax? – about that.

This village was in the region of Ka Central (Kaou) that was under the emperor's direct jurisdiction. That's why, from the start, he must have asked if the quack can directly speak to him.

However, that would also have to be impossible.

It wasn't that she couldn't understand that bad provincial officials raise taxes for their self-interest, but it couldn't be helped in this case. Even if they raise the tax, they won't rise to the point where it would hard for them to eat.

The quack was also troubled.

That's right, it was something the quack couldn't do. At the quack's lap, there was maomao who was batting his swaying moustache with its front paws.

"Since I'm merely a eunuch."

At the quack's half-hearted response, everyone drooped their shoulders.

Though he was crestfallen, the husband opened his mouth.

"Then, there is a meeting tomorrow. Can't you come along for that at least?"

"If it's that much."

(He won't be any use though.)

I wonder if I can come along, Maomao thought, as she picked up maomao who was clawing at the quack.

Chapter 14

Paper Village, Part 2

The discussion was to be held in an eating-house in that landowner's village. The place wasn't that far from the papermaking village. It didn't take more than one hour by foot. The dreary eating house was a moderately large building. As it also functioned as an inn, it probably dealt with travellers from the high road rather than the locals.

There was the quack's brother in law, his two sons, and three men from the village here. And with the quack and Maomao included, it made a total of eight people. The opposition had more than ten old well-built men, and there was an important looking middle-aged man with a beard who had plonked himself down.

The boss and the boss lady of the eating house regarded that group in aggravation.

They must have chosen this place since they might break out into a scuffle with the talks being an unreasonable demand. That kind of troublesome talk.

The quack was trembling. Maomao peered at the boss lady of the shop and felt out of place by being the only female here. Unfortunately, no one seemed to be interested in a girl who was like chicken bones. "Why is someone like this here?" they shook their heads and snorted.

It had been hard work for her to follow along.

The quack aunty had stopped her. She was told that even if she was like this, she was not married, so it would be dreadful for her to go through some danger. And above all, she would stick out too much.

Even if she was told that, on the other hand, there was the quack who was looking at Maomao miserably, and Maomao was also interested in that contract or whatever it was.

Can't be helped. She voiced an adequate response.

"I have a distant relative that knows much about this. Is it no good for me to hear it

and tell him that there is this kind of thing?”

She had said.

After she said that, as if the aunty had thought they were an Officer of the Court (as in the judicial court), she reluctantly relented.

Unfortunately, she didn't have an Officer of the Court as an acquaintance. If there is a pseudo-eunuch who does something similar, then there is, but that's another thing. The distant relative that Maomao had mentioned is the short man whose speciality was flipping the abacus. If she consulted that guy, she could know any methods of making money where the law cannot touch.

And so, Maomao sat on a seat a fair distance away and accepted the tea from the shop's boss lady. Perhaps it also functioned as a bar, the smell of wine was intense, involuntarily making her want to order some, but let's endure.

The wine looked to be unrefined rice wine. There was a large barrel on the side of the kitchen – she could see white wine from there. Clear wine and distilled liquor are preferred in the capital, so there was that impression with the typical countryside wine.

While Maomao got preoccupied with the wine, the discussions were started by the opposition. Just in case, let's listen in.

“Have ya prepared the money?”

Of course, the one who spat out the lines like a third-rate villain was the bearded middle-aged man who was sitting like he was important looking. The people around the landowner man, she wasn't sure if they were tenant farmers or bodyguards; they were all tough scoundrels.

The physiques of the husband's people were good, but their numbers were at a disadvantage no matter how she saw it, Maomao thought.

“There should still be the deadline. Can we consider it for a bit longer?”

The husband said meekly. Laid out between the landowner and the husband was a sheet of paper. That must be the written contract.

“Ya have no liberty to consider. There’s no way we can do it with good intentions. If ya can’t pay up, the only way is to leave.”

They were thrown upon their own resources. They must have been told many times, from the looks of it.

“Even *we* think of wanting to have some convenience. That’s why, we told ya we’ll wait until this winter, didn’t we? We just said that we wanted ya to teach us some during that period, didn’t we?”

(How unreasonable.)

Do they leave immediately? Or do they leave before the end of the year? Even if they were given the grace period, that would be the period for them to teach their own craft to the opposition.

There was no way they could have chosen their next place of residence, and the craft could be leaked at the latter’s discretion. It was probably so that they could snatch away the appearance of being the purveyor to the imperial court as it is, with the extent that only the personnel had been replaced.

It’s irritating, but there’s no way that would pass through normally.
And above all, the evidence was on the table.

However, she thought it was strange. Rather than going out of his way to make them go away from learning the work of farmers, he should have just made them work as his servants in a way to balance out their debt. Does he hate outsiders that much?

Maomao trotted over to stand behind the husband. The quack was beside him. His moustache was quivering.

Despite the fact that the contract had been written more than ten years ago, the quality of the paper was beautiful. Crude products would get tattered in a couple of years.

Written there, was the purport stating the monthly repayment sum and that it had been paid for in twenty years. A signature was properly marked in place of a seal at the end.

Even though it was a reliable thing as it is. What was he haughtily getting upon his high horse for? She tilted her head, and the younger son stealthily told her. He could be telling the quack, but Maomao would hear him too.

“He said that the contract is invalid.”

And furthermore, the text on it was said to be written by a scribe.

“Even though there is a signature?”

“That’s the genuine article though.”

It seems he can’t read the previous landowner’s writing.

“Can he not read it?”

Maomao asked.

Isn’t that strange? Maomao tilted her head. The landowner should have scanned over the document, and he should have received that kind of education foremost.

“It’s because he’s the son-in-law.”

(Ah.)

She presumed.

If he’s the son-in law, she understood. He would have to be a tenant farmer who had worked hard. In that case, there was no way he could get educated, and even he thought of learning after becoming the son-in-law, it wasn’t something he would do easily.

“The previous wasn’t the scribe. His wife had done it.”

Seems the contract was written up after the wife’s death.

(Hmmm.)

She wanted to believe that the contract is real. Since the signature was said to be the real thing, it must be true that the contract had been written up before the previous landowner’s eyes.

“Are there no people who stood with the scribe during that occasion?”

“All of them died.”

The contract was from fifteen years ago. All of them seemed to be old aged.

(It really is unreasonable.)

While Maomao was scratching her head, the landowner thrust the two narrow choices at the husband. As the farmers around them gave unpleasant smirks, the paper artisans could only shrink down.

Only that eldest son bit his lip with a complicated expression.

“If ya don’t leave immediately, there’s nothing we can do. From tomorrow, hand over your young’uns. If you assist us, teach us the job until the end of the year.”

The paper artisans’ fists trembled. Although the quack had come along, he really is a blockhead. There’s no way he would be useful.

Only Maomao looked at everyone nonchalantly.

As expected, she was interested in the wine.

She thought of drinking one cup afterwards, but doing that here would be not reading the atmosphere.

However, the landowner’s side was brimming with that atmosphere. They started to order for wine in a good mood.

“Oi, order for these guys too.”

The farmers who came along to the landowner’s splendid banquet clamoured. This side, on the contrary, was like a funeral.

The boss lady of the shop unwillingly placed the wine and cups onto a tray and brought it over.

Maomao sniffed.

(Huh?)

She looked at the contents of the cups the farmers were holding. It wasn't unrefined sake, it was clear wine. What the landowner man was drinking, was something else – an amber liquid she knew to be distilled liquor. It seemed to be considerably strong for wine.

The landowner she understood. It was a given for him to drink his wine of preference. However, she felt it was a very big treat to go as far as to give refined sake to the tenant farmers. This eating house had a lot of unrefined sake that was one step inferior.

(...)

Maomao, as she felt sorry for the boss lady who was carrying wine like it was a bother, raised her hand and called out to her.

“What?”

“One cup for me too. Of that wine.”

Can't be helped then, the boss lady brought the wine over to her.

“Lass, in this kind of time...”

Not just the quack, the paper artisans also watched her in shock.

Maomao enthusiastically sculled the wine.

The flavour was a good sweet taste. It wasn't as refined as the wine of the capital, but as you have it, this wasn't bad. It's just that the mildness of the taste of alcohol content was strong in comparison.

If this was exceptionally bad – she reached the reason.

Maomao licked her lips.

The eating house, that was unable to bar out troublesome guests, had a large volume of refined sake. Furthermore, even though he is a high-handed landowner, he treated the farmers to a different wine.

(Hmm, I see now.)

Maomao looked at the amazed husband.

“Excuse me. Is there a winery in this area?”

“...no, I don’t think there’s something like that.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Maomao curled her lips. She picked up the wine and the cup, and went to stand before the bustling landowner and his people.

Maomao slammed the cup on the table and gave a smile that gave the impression of a bird of prey.

“What is it, lass? Are ya pouring me a cup?”

The landowner gave her a mocking smile, suddenly making her laugh.

“La-lass!”

The quack clung onto Maomao, trying to quickly get her away from here. But Maomao ignored him, and said to the landowner as she laughed.

“Shall we have a drinking contest?”

Saying that, Maomao thumped her body.

Chapter 15

Paper Village, Part 3

“A drinking contest, how gutsy of ya.”

The landowner said to the impertinent maiden who had appeared before him. The farmers laughed derisively.

“Oi, you serious?”

The artisans looked at Maomao in concern. It was too much for the quack – he became dazed and just collapsed. Just as his head was about to hit the ground, his younger nephew caught him.

“There’s no problem. That aside, a question. How much debt do you have left?”

“...a thousand notes of silver in a year. Since we’ve paid for half this year, there is four thousand five hundred left.”

Hm, that wasn’t something even a moneylender can easily lend to them. They were purveyors to the imperial court, but they were not fit for mass production, so they cannot easily make money.

“Is that so?”

Maomao fwumped onto the chair.

“While we’re at it, shall we make a wager?”

“A wager, ya say. What a huge pitch.”

The landowner seemed greatly confident in his drinking. He was totally mocking her.

“Ya have something ya want to wager?”

“Indeed, as I said, Didn’t I already indicate that before?”

Maomao pat her own chest.

“I can go for three hundred if you sell me to a procurer.”

Buhoh– The scoundrels spat out wine one after another.

“Hahahaha! Three hundred, ya say. What a huge pitch. Lass, ya know about the market price of things?”

It’s because she knew that she said it. She thought of seeing the many maidens who had been sold off.

“No matter how pretty a woman, they won’t manage a hundred either way, and yet, and yet...”

Seemingly like he hit the spot, he laughed, spittle flying everywhere. It was convenient as the surrounds of the wine was also good.

“Puh”, seeing those guys, Maomao laughed. Half the drunk men glared at her, understanding that they were clearly being scorned.

“I mean, isn’t it a given that they won’t manage fifty silvers even if you hand over a soil-covered daikon as it is? To think you don’t even know that common sense.”

Maomao’s body swayed. Her nape was grabbed, and she was pulled up to her tiptoes.

It seems a daikon being the ridicule of a country girl was well circulated.

“Oi, try saying another piece!”

Number one of the red-faced farmers had seized Maomao up. The fist that was raised overhead was blackened with dirt – if she got hit, she would have no resistance.

(It can’t be helped if I get hit though.)

She can’t withdraw here.

The quack had fallen flat. The artisans were all stiff-faced.

“You can’t even read and write properly. Fufu, in that case, you can’t ever use *paper* in your lifetime.”

Although the hand moved to strike Maomao, it didn’t hit her.

“Stop that. If she becomes damaged goods, her value would decrease.”

Told by the big landowner, farmer number one put her down.

The landowner said that her value will decrease.

In other words, he indicated that he will be taking up Maomao’s wager.

“Well then, who’s starting?”

The shocked artisans dumbfoundedly looked at Maomao.

The eating house’s boss and boss lady had expressions of suspense.

The quack was lying on the floor.

And.

“I’ll be your first opponent!”

The man who had come to seize Maomao said.

It was, superbly convenient.



How many empty wine bottles had fallen to the ground?

And the number of jerks who were dead drunk on the floor was four. Five now.

“...are you kidding me?”

It was the quack’s nephew, who was looking after the quack, who said that in a

shocked voice.

“Oh my, is it already over?”

Maomao sculled the rest of the wine in the cup. It was a distilled liquor that burned her throat. An item that was too high-class for such an eating house in the countryside. But, for Maomao who was used to drinking much stronger wine, it was no big deal.

It was a mistake for them to try to crush down Maomao quickly by putting out high proof distilled liquor. The men rapidly got smashed at the high strength wine they were not used to drinking. They were passed out, but it shouldn't be to the point of death. And above all, Maomao found it intolerable to be sold off, so she had no intentions of going easy on them.

“It's a hundred and fifty.”

That was said to be Maomao's value.

Since she overcharged with three hundred silvers at the start, she thought that was adequate.

By the way, there were cases where procurers, who stroke hard bargains, also acquire village girls for about twenty silvers.

She won against the first person with those funds. Once she did so, the second person came up. He must have been drunk from the start as he didn't take it seriously, downing the strong wine in one go, and got wrecked.

The third and fourth person challenged like so. For as much as remaining from the previous portion of wine, Maomao was at a disadvantage. That was common sense, but unfortunately, Maomao didn't cross their anticipation.

(It makes five people with this huh.)

The first person was a hundred and fifty, the second person three hundred, third person six hundred. The two thousand four hundred silvers with the five people were the amount Maomao earned.

Perhaps they realised that part, the jerks were glaring at her with flushed faces.

There were still half remaining on the side of the opposition but Maomao had no

problems if she won in the next single bout. There should be four thousand five hundred of debt remaining.

It was a relief that her opponents were drunk. By saying what came to head, she got the draft of a simple contract. That was five sheets. In any case, these guys must be thinking that contract is mere scrap paper. She understood that from the part where the large landowner who took the leading position was going to throw it away like it was scrap.

While his face twisted in vexation, he finally brought out his favourite wine bottle.

“Shall I to be your opponent?”

The bearded landowner smiled, but his eyes were sharp.

Maomao rubbed her belly.

(I wonder if I can keep going.)

As expected, to have five opponents, you somewhat get filled.

As the landowner was drinking his usual distilled wine, the wine seemed strong. As he smiled at the sight of Maomao who looked like she was suffering a little, he scanned over the contract.

“Don’t lump me together with those guys.”

He scribbled on his signature and slapped the contract onto the table.

“Shall we have the procurer come for us tomorrow?”

“I know that much.”

Can’t be helped. Maomao took out a small bottle from her bosom.

“Oi! What the heck is that!”

The landowner’s followers lunged towards her.

“I had enough of the taste of this wine, so I just thought of changing the flavour for a bit.”

Saying that, Maomao triumphantly poured the contents of the small bottle into the cup where the amber liquid was drifting.

The landowner, seeing that, twitched.

“Wait up. In that case, can I have some for my share too?”

Since he said that, Maomao passed the small bottle over to the landowner. The landowner studied the small bottle and poured all of what was left into his cup.

“This ain’t medicine that makes one harder to get drunk or something, right?”

In response to the grinning man, Maomao gulped down the cup expressionlessly.

The landowner confirmed Maomao’s sober face after drinking it all up, and then gulped down his cup with a grin. He swallowed it all down, and then—

Collapsed.

The followers rushed up to wake the landowner, but his lights were out.

“Oi! What did you serve him?”

“Serve what. He drank the same thing I did.”

The reason he was entirely out, was none other than alcohol.

“The wager is my victory.”

“” ... ””

While everyone present was dumbfounded, Maomao stood up and took the contract. Without staggering, she passed that over to the artisan husband, and went to stand before the eating house’s boss lady.

“Where is the toilet?”

“Go outside. It’s on the right.”

“Thank you very much.”

Maomao headed to the toilet with a partial jog.

If you were to have several bottles of wine, you’ll have to get the urge to urinate at least once.

Even Maomao was unable to shamefully leak in public.



“Hey, my dear. What did you do?”

The artisan husband said as he carefully folded the contract.

“Nothing much. I just wanted to change the taste of the wine and added alcohol.”

Maomao had put in plenty of medicinal herbs and medical instruments in the collar of her outfit. She also had disinfectant alcohol.

Since it was for disinfectant use, its strength was different to normal wine. A normal guy would collapse with a sip, and yet the landowner had filled it to the brim.

“...Can I, ask one question?”

“What is it?”

“You also put in that alcohol or whatever and drank it, right?”

He said as his face stiffened a little.

“Yeah. Since I know that I would still be fine with much. I just thought that it would be better if I could end this quickly.”

If Maomao were to act suspiciously like that, she had gathered that the other side would get sucked in. It was relief that they got into a fortunate state.

She might have won even if she went on with it normally, but honestly, she didn’t know

how long she could hold her bladder.

“It’s a relief I got to the toilet in time.”

“...that is the best thing. Just because you have that much confidence, to make a wager with your body as collateral, I think badly of it. And to say nothing of it being for our sake.”

“Do we have some misunderstanding?”

Maomao took the folded contract from the husband.

“This is my portion.”

Maomao beamed.

“Wa-wait, Lass!”

In place of the husband who was in mute amazement, the quack finally woke up.

“Don’t say such cruel things.”

“Even if you say that, I don’t have that much obligation. Besides, the talk hasn’t finished completely.”

Maomao glanced away. The landowner was there, getting up with the assistance of his follower as he held his lolling head.

From the fact that there was spew scattered on the floor, he must have returned to sobriety by forcing the wine up.

“Wouldn’t it be better if you slept a bit longer?”

“The previous wager is invalid!”

Oh, his reaction was as she expected.

“The drinking bout was something like a sideshow. I wasn’t serious from the start.”

“But, the contract is here. It’s drafted with your own handwriting. Don’t tell me that

you are going to say that you can't read this too?"

"As if I know about that sort of thing! It's scrap paper, scrap!"

Maomao crossed her arms and went to the wine barrels that were left in the eating house.

"Then, it can't be helped."

She slapped the wine barrels.

"Then I have no choice but to report to the officials that you are falsifying taxes."

At Maomao's sentence, everyone became as still as death.

The landowner gapped his mouth. The farmers who were still awake were blatantly agitated.

The bosses of the eating house looked a little uneasy, but at the same time, made expressions of relief.

The artisans exchanged glances, and afterwards, looked at Maomao.

The quack only tilted his head.

"What do you mean by falsifying taxes?"

The one who first opened his mouth was the rebellious eldest son.

"You need the permission of the country to make wine. It's a different matter if it's for private enjoyment but selling it in shops like this is a subject of liquor tax no matter how you consider it."

Upon trading it, it will come under some taxation. And the tax rate is higher for luxury items. The tax for wine shops are higher than eating houses, and when it becomes a brothel, the rate jumps up. The madam had always muttered about it.

She considered the question why this shop lent its place as the place of discussion to the landowner. She also considered that it was because they were tenants, but the

large volume of wine was what caught her eyes more.

If the store was to stock a lot cheap, reasonably tasty wine, it would have to be helpful for it. They cannot disregard a bit of trouble even.

When the landowner ordered wine, the reason they didn't take out this unrefined sake, she considered it was there. They would have to be brewing wine for the farmer's use. There was no reason to request the wine they have gotten tired of drinking after all this time here.

"Could it be, that the ingredients for the wine have also been rejected?"

Wine uses a large volume of rice and wheat. This wine seemed to use rice.

Suddenly, she recalled this landowner's accusation.

*"The yield of rice had decreased because you b*stards have contaminated the water. If there's not enough water, you can't grow rice."*

Maomao countered.

"Isn't this a lie? Rather, isn't the quality of the rice better than before?"

Rice crops, through the flow of water carrying rotting leaves and soil nutrients from upstream, the soil won't become barren. It's a different matter if it's poison, but what dissolves in the water from papermaking is glue made from rice and wood shavings that are the source of paper. Rather, it functioned as good fertiliser, Maomao considered.

The previous landowner deciding to sell the plot of land instead of a lease contract, would have to be because of that part?

Whatever the reason, the other side probably didn't really know, but there was no mistaking the rice harvest has increased. She judged that having them stay here for long will be useful hereafter.

And so, at some time, they had covered up the part where their harvest has increased and turned it onto wine or whatever, she arbitrarily presumed. It's going to be quite grave to have double tax evasion.

Voicing up to that point was against her dad's teaching so she remained silent, but as

far as she saw the expressions of the landowner and the farmers, she didn't seem to be mistaken either.

"Yo-you have proof?"

One of the farmers voiced.

"That's right! Do you have proof?!"

In agreement to that, the other farmers also spoke.

"It's fine. If you're innocent, nothing will come out of it even if the officials investigate your family."

Maomao said, purposely pasting on a smile.

The farmers who were energetically protesting shut up. Could it be bullseye?

"You're quite firm, lass."

The landowner said as he held his still woozy head.

"You think that it'll end as it is by doing this?"

"Those words, I'll return them back to you. At least, please look at the current situation."

Maomao stood in a position to look down on the landowner.

Half of his helpers were out from wine, showing no signs of moving, the landowner himself too. Speaking of the rest, though they weren't to the point of collapsing, they drank a lot of wine. It was hard to say they were sober.

In comparison, there were six sober men with good physical builds here. The quack was not on the team, so she didn't include him from the start.

The owners of the eating house seemed to want to be unrelated for as much as they could. They should be wanting to absolve any knowledge about the wine as well.

She had no plans of settling this with violence, but if the opposition had that intention,

this side would have to do the same.

From the repeated accusations, the artisans would have to get mad too.

Maomao gave an immensely vulgar smile and fluttered the contract on the forehead of the landowner.

“It’s fine to call for help—. Since this side will dispatch a fast horse all the way to the officials in exchange for that.”

Maomao sang, in a good mood.

“Lass, isn’t your atmosphere somewhat different than usual?”

The quack mumbled that.

Amid that, the door of the eating house was opened with a loud bang.

What is it? when she thought that, there was a maiden clad in a trim dress standing by the doorway. And as soon as she saw the state of the interior, she paled. Contrary to running to the fallen landowner, she went down to her knees and lowered her head.

“I know that Father is making an unreasonable request again. But, please stop with the unnecessary force.”

She lowered her head deeply.

Not at Maomao. She lowered her head towards the artisans.

“No, it’s not us.”

The second son shook his head, but the maiden kept her head lowered. Her forehead touched the floor, no signs of paying heed that her hair was messy.

“I’m sorry. Please forgive him. Please forgive my foolish Father.”

Not hearing the voices around her, the maiden only apologised. Amid that, the one who moved was the rebellious eldest son.

“Don’t do such a thing. To your father.”

He slowly hugged the maiden's shoulders, and raised her head as he calmed her down. The maiden, as tears rolled down her cheeks, nodded when she saw the eldest son's face.

The one who was in a frenzy from seeing that, was the landowner.

"Oi! Don't get close to my daughter, you b*stard who don't even know where you came from!"

He yelled, and when he tried to stand up – his legs seemed to be still wobbly – he crashed to the floor.

"Dad!"

"Father-in-law!"

"I have no intentions of being your father!"

What is it, this atmosphere.

The second son watched his older brother and the others in amazement.

"Could this be-"

"It's mostly as I have guessed."

The reason the eldest son was close to the farmers, the reason the landowner hated people from elsewhere and tried to chase them out, she felt she understood the two.

It's good that she knows, but it was better to not know anything about it, she thought.

From the foolish comedy-like negotiations that were spread out before her eyes, she honestly had no mood to describe it.

"Older brother does it all the way."

"It'll be unbearable if one village gets ruined from that."

Maomao spoke for the other artisans. *Uh huh*, she nodded. For the most part, she thought that it would have to be a mistake to bring the eldest son to this place of discussions at this time point, but when she thought really hard, she had forgotten that he was the quack's relatives.

It can't be helped since he's the quack's relatives. It was a given that he's lacking.

Maomao plopped down on a seat in the absurdity of it.

"Wine please."

She raised her hand and called for the boss lady.

"You still want to drink?"

"I can keep going."

At her words, gazes of shock were gathered on her, but she didn't pay mind to that.

The wine might have been unexpectantly effective.

When she noticed that she was more talkative than normal, was after she sobered up.

"You were a really bad person."

The quack told her many times.



In the end, the four thousand eight hundred silvers didn't come into Maomao's hands. Of course, it was easy money that she got. The strange feeling of discontent would have to be bigger.

Instead, for a decade hereafter, they promised to deliver a hundred and fifty koku (1 koku is 180.39kg) of rice free of charge to the Rokushoukan. For the most part, the amount of rice consumption in a year in the Rokushoukan is around three koku per two people. It was considerably large for several person's serving, but since rice can be exchanged for money, it's no problem.

She was lending it to the madam. She didn't have to pay for the rent of the pharmacy

for fifty years.

Furthermore, the contract with the paper artisans was unchanged from before. It was big that their brewing of wine out of their own accord was exposed. As the farmers were scared of the officials, they were unable to say anything imprudent. For now, after that, they were told that the quack was one who works in the imperial court.

For the time being, the quack did not lose face.

After this, whether they falsified their taxes or not, was unrelated to Maomao.

Moreover, she didn't know what happened to the eldest son of the paper artisans and the landowner's daughter. Even though if they quickly split up, they would tie closer relationships with the farmers. *Shall I tempt him by bringing him to the pleasure district once*, Maomao considered something evil.

And so, Maomao finally returned to the pleasure district, but-

"Nyaaaaa."

Why is it here?

Even though it wasn't that calm on the way to the place, it was wandering about in the horse-drawn carriage.

The luggage that had the highest grade paper she accepted as souvenir. It went inside there. The topmost layer of paper was tattered, used to grind its claws.

"Oh, it's maomao."

The sharp-sighted Chou'u turned up and swung the cord of a sash without delay, playing with the cat.

The quack returned to the inner palace in haste, and even if Maomao was once again wishing to send maomao to him, a lot of medicine prescription requests came in her room.

Maomao exhaled and started to look for the medicinal herbs she needed for the prescription from the shelves.

Chapter 16

The Issues Piling Up

The moon shone brightly in the sky. The cloudless night was cold, though the snow didn't pile up thickly. There was a brazier in the room, and Suiren, his maid, had passed him some ginger tea to warm him up.

Jinshi sat on the bed that has gotten slightly warmer. He gulped it down.

How long was she going to treat him like a child?

She had added in a generous amount of honey. The last time he whined about the spiciness of ginger was when he was *seven*.

To be honest, he would have preferred a drink that kept him awake, but he knew that if he were to pass it back to Suiren, she would give him unspoken pressure. She must have found out that he hadn't been sleeping properly lately. Jinshi's obfuscations were transparent to the nanny who had known him since he was young.

However, as long as he had things he needed to do, he currently had no other choice than to continue working.

"It is a hardship."

Those who stand on top, in exchange for their authority, need to hold responsibility. Though, it would be easy to just cast aside that troublesome thing and degrade into a dumb creature.

To eat whatever he likes. To sleep whenever he likes. To do whatever he likes.

It would be even better if he was a beloved thing with that.

As he thought that, he sighed. *That probably won't be granted.*

This world was full of matters that were beyond one's control.

While thinking that it would be easier if he became dumb, there was a part of himself

who rejected the idea of becoming dumb.

As the lights swayed, Jinshi took out a sheet of paper from the locked drawer. He spread out the folded wrinkled paper.

It was what Rouran, the eldest daughter of the Shi Clan, had left him.

To overlook the ones who have died once, was it?

The woman had promised that from Jinshi. She had passed this over in return for her gratitude.

How serious was what she had written? Could it be that, even after Rouran's passing, she was continuing to make a sport of Jinshi?

Its subject made one suspect that.

"Locust plague huh."

It is a natural disaster that caused the downfall of a country at times. Rouran was an assistant to that research. Unfortunately, the man who conducted that had already become an invalid. From the side effect of that – the resurrection drug.

The paper had a drawing of a map. It was noted with arrows. The movements of the wind from the west – that was what it showed.

The former court physician who had become an invalid was a man who had the experience of studying abroad in the West. It was because he had known about the geography of that place, his idea was so extraordinary that Jinshi couldn't have come up with it.

Locust Plague. In many cases, it starts off with the appearance of swarming locusts hitching a ride on the westerly winds. The swarming locusts originate from places several hundred ri, and at times, even several thousand ri away. These locusts multiply on the grounds of this country and start off by causing small-scale locust damages. And if left as is, in the following year, they will wreak even greater damages.

That coincided with what the pharmacist maiden, Maomao, had pointed out to Jinshi. The countermeasures have already been changed for implementation this year – for

the increased tax in regions with little locust damage and the provisional ban on sparrow hunting, and in addition, the initiation and so on of the manufacturing of pesticides for the rural areas.

He had no idea whether there will be a locust plague or not, but even if there weren't any, it was not a bad plunge as a means to increase the yield of crops.

Even Maomao could not come up with ideas for what to do beyond that, so Jinshi didn't think it was a bad move.

However, there was one more thing in Rouran's descriptions that made his head hurt.

The case where locusts can come from other areas, no, other countries.

Locust plagues exist in other countries too.

And it is not absent historically that countries wage war with each other due to famine.

Jinshi took out yet another sheet of paper. It was a drawing of what locust had over-multiplied last year.

He compared that with Rouran's paper.

There were several kinds of locusts drawn on the side of the map.

That was a presentation of what kinds of locusts are common in what region.

“...”

He had plucked at his hair subconsciously.

Quite an unpleasant possibility was increasing.

Just how much happy would he be if he was mistaken.

The former court physician's research was incomplete, and from the start, he would be happy if this was an empty theory after all.

The large outbreak of locusts last year. Speaking of which region's locusts it resembled the most...

The country northwest of the country of Rii. Possessing vast regions that produce

grain and forestry resources, the country was called Hoku'aren(北亜連 North Aren) by Jinshi's people.

The reason nomadic tribes frequently make a pass at this country, was due to this Hoku'aren.

As for the relationship between countries, let's say that they were not that friendly.

The last large war that was waged with this country was in the era before the previous emperor. After that war, the previous emperor from the last fell, and afterwards, the previous emperor was enthroned.

And then, in the year that war began, it was left on the records that his own country and Hoku'aren both had locust plagues.

If you become needy, you will have no choice but to steal from elsewhere. That calls forth increased hunger, where several thousands of people die from starvation. Although the numbers were recorded, it was said that it would have to be several times more in reality.

The fact that the numbers of war dead and famine dead were not clear in regards to this, was related to the fact that the government of those days was much more depraved compared to nowadays.

The previous emperor's empress dowager who was called the Empress was named a wicked woman in the current era. However, she assisted the previous emperor who had been enthroned afterwards, and in response to her ability to cut away the rotten pus, he could only be in awe.

It was absurd.

His current majesty being treated as a wise gentleman was from his using the legacy the Empress had left behind, And when he thought that it was because there was the villain called Shishou, he understood to what extent they were made to dance on her palms.

An inconceivable parting gift.

As Jinshi wished that this was a needless anxiety, he closed the drawer and locked it.

It would be good if there is nothing. If there is nothing, that is fine.

However, there was no way he can see it optimistically and invite the worst-case scenario.

It wasn't that he liked war. But, it also had to be done.

"That would have to be a parting gift too."

He inadvertently spoke.

Jinshi recalled the fortress the Shi Clan had used as a stronghold. Due to the avalanche, it got buried under snow, but underneath that slept a large quantity of gunpowder and hand-cannons.

The hand-cannons that had been refined many times were more outstanding than what is carried by the military. Unfortunately, its blueprints had been burned up from the fire, but as long as they had the actual thing, they can write it up again.

By using the fortress as is, they had progressed in the production of gunpowder. However, he took into account the point where the danger of the gunpowder catching fire with the previous manufacturing process was high.

In regards to the manufacturing of the actual hand-cannon, they switched gears. It was because Jinshi had hopes in the forestry resources of the Shi Northern Province – with that unusable, they needed to come up with something else. There were also raw materials for iron manufacture, but they will need fuel.

His head hurt.

There were other things he had to do.

He must look over the matter in question that would have to be appearing in tomorrow's court council.

The high officials were momentarily compliant from the Shi Clan incident, but it was hard to say that they had removed all the pus.

He won't say it's a lizard's tail, but it was almost only the Shi Clan that got cut down from that incident, so there should be other high officials who had stuck with them.

How far will they be compliant? It would be a godsend if they permanently stayed

quiet

Conversely, the ones who started to raise their voices – were those people unrelated to the Shi Clan or did they have a lot of guts? Which one could it be?

There was one person of interest among those.

In terms of position, the guy, who had treated Shishou like a small fry, had a strong impression. However, as his upward compatibility was gone, his presence shot up in one breath.

Although Jinshi was no longer a eunuch, the work was still like what he had undertaken then.

Currently, there are two high ranked consorts in the inner palace – one is Consort Rifa. She, a distant relative to the reigning emperor and Jinshi, had only given birth to her second child recently. Rifa's child is a boy, but as Gyokuyou, once the favoured consort, had already become empress, the latter's child was made the crown prince. As long as any misfortune wouldn't befall Empress Gyokuyou, the chance of Rifa being the legal wife was low, and the reigning emperor also planned it that way.

As blood gets thick, the offspring will be susceptible to illnesses – Ruomen who had recently returned to being a court physician had said that. That was something he had already known.

At the same time.

Empress Gyokuyou was born in the west, in the Western I Province(西戎州). Hereafter, in the case that there is a strife with the neighbouring country, this place will become important land.

For Jinshi, he had thought that it was still too early to pick the empress, but when he was explained this, he had no choice but to agree.

Consort Rifa is smart. She understood that well enough in her mind too.

However, speaking of the other consort.

Consort Riishu. She is sixteen this year. It was already good to treat her as an adult

but...

Jinshi sighed deeply.

He knew about the reigning emperor's taste in women. His tastes were for those who were really femininely voluptuous. He had no idea if that was his taste from the start or was it because of the unpleasant feelings from the previous emperor's inclination.

However, he wanted him to remember that those called consorts are a job, and at the same time, that they maintain the balance in politics.

Considering how his tastes spanned to a wide range, even just for appearances, would it be worded as being as subtle as a sledgehammer by saying that it's because he's a man?

The current emperor, he had another reason where that wasn't his taste.

Former high ranked consort Ah Duo had doted on Consort Riishu like a daughter. It seemed the current emperor had also held tea parties in the time when he was the crown prince, together with Consort Riishu and Ah Duo.

A make-believe family – that was what they made.

He likes voluptuous women?

He also heard another explanation.

Before Ah Duo couldn't give birth anymore, she had a slender figure.

However, the current emperor, at the time he was the crown prince, didn't try to place any other consort aside from Ah Duo.

How was he supposed to take that?

Jinshi had noticed that a couple of years ago. Gaoshun had also noticed from quite a while ago.

Jinshi, who hadn't known that, got stuck with being the eunuch Jinshi. As he didn't want to assume the position of the next emperor, he came forward with the duty of picking a wife for his brother.

When he thought about it now, he felt it was quite a cruel thing.

He sighed and closed the materials for the court council.

He went to bed, extinguished the light. While thinking that he has been slacking on training before sleep recently, he decided to sleep.

Let's inform his majesty about that matter tomorrow.

If he were to show his attendance even for appearances, the official who is now allowed to raise his face little by little might also calm down. The opposite was also possible, but it can't be helped in that case.

The man well-matched to being Shishou's subordinate. That is Consort Riishu's father, Uryuu (卯柳, Mao Liu).

Chapter 17

Tool of Politics

When the bare branches were spouting buds, a meek-faced messenger showed up.

(Something bothersome again?)

Maomao accepted the message apathetically and noticed that it wasn't from the usual gorgeous noble. No, there's no mistaking they are a gorgeous noble though...

"Is it Ah Duo-sama?"

It was from the former high ranked consort.

As she wondered what was up, the carriage rocked up to the outer court rather than Ah Duo's villa. The palace of the outer court was situated on the border of the inner court that enclosed the inner palace.

Maomao swung her legs like a child atop a chair, still wondering what this could be about.

There were military officials at the entrance of the spacious room. She thought they were military officials, but she recognised those officials from the inner palace before. In other words, they were eunuchs.

(Why eunuchs?)

If they were outside the inner palace, it would be normal to use military officials. Her question was quickly answered.

"Thanks for waiting."

Speaking like a man, the person who entered the room was Ah Duo. It was Ah Duo with her figure tall and slender, clad in barbarian robes. Then, Maomao could see a small shadow hiding behind her.

“Ah Duo-sama, and...”

It was Consort Riishu, on the verge of tears.

“This time is special. I was planning to borrow the flower of the inner palace for a short while.”

Ah Duo declared with the bearing of a dignified actor.



And so, together with Consort Riishu who was specially allowed to go out, Maomao was at Ah Duo’s villa. Maomao was overawed by the atmosphere of the tea party that started in the gazebo.

(This aroma would have to be rose tea.)

The tea was made from roses – the aroma and taste were both bittersweet. Though it was called a rose tea, it seems the red colouring wasn’t from roses but a red flower from the southern countries. It beautified skin and was also good for health, but at any rate, that flower was rare so it was a product that even Maomao hadn’t drunk outside the inner palace.

(The older sisters might like it.)

I wonder if she can give me some later – it was her usual thought.

However, she also thought the rare high-class item was a little out of place here.

“Ah–, that’s *mine*—”

“I don’t care. I took it first so it’s *mine*—”

Laughing rowdily around them, were the children who lived in the villa. They were different to the survivors of the Shi Clan, it seems the whimsical owner of the villa looks after orphans. The Shi Clan children were nowhere to be found, and Suirei wasn’t around either, so they were probably somewhere else. Consort Riishu wouldn’t have known, but just in case, it was better that she doesn’t meet them.

And so, even the high-class tea was treated as paint to stain the tablecloth. The powder from the baked sweet that had been served on the plates was scattered all over the table.

Since they were picking up the sweets with muddy hands, Consort Riishu, who had a good upbringing, was completely taken back. Ah Duo chided them with a slightly troubled expression.

(These guys, won't they listen after you hit them?)

Unfortunately, while disguising as a man was a strong point of Ah Duo, her disposition seemed to be gentle, so she probably wouldn't accept Maomao's education by fists.

The one who was more out of place here than the child-hating Maomao was Consort Riishuu. She was quivering like a small animal as she was being surrounded by children smaller than her.

"Come on, play over there."

Ah Duo finally said. The maidservants pulled the children's hands.

Ah Duo and Consort Riishu. The two had known each other for a long time. However, why did Ah Duo take Consort Riishu out of the inner palace like this? And called Maomao as well?

Speaking of that reason—.

"I heard that you opened an inner palace class before. Can you hold one now for this child?"

"Hah?"

In response to Maomao's amazed reply, Consort Riishu trembled like a baby mouse.

Consort Riishu is sixteen this year. Even if the emperor didn't crook his index finger, it was the age where she must attend to him.

Amongst the four high ranked consorts, Rouran was gone. Consort, no, Empress Gyokuyou and Consort Rifa had each recently given birth to imperial princes. Even if

it was like this, Consort Riishu must accompany the emperor in the bedroom. The emperor's position would also have to be bad.

It was about whether or not her heart is in it.

Hm, Maomao nodded. Since it's Ah Duo, she must have properly gotten the emperor's permission. That was because, rather than the fact that she was a former high ranked consort, she was thinking about Consort Riishu's matter.

However, on the other hand, she noticed that the former consort was producing needless complications.

Gloomy regret was also mixed within the fear-filled eyes of the trembling Consort Riishu.

Unfortunately, Ah Duo hadn't noticed that.

(Ah, oh boy.)

Maomao won't talk about other people's matters, but Ah Duo would have to be that kind of person. It was likely that since she, as a person, was biased to the allocation of ability*, she was the type who couldn't recognise the emotion she should have recognised.

And so, the first thing Maomao, who was watching coolly as the third party, said was...

"In that case, can I be alone with Consort Riishu?"

At Maomao's words, Consort Riishu trembled. Ah Duo nodded eagerly, "Sure thing".



After Ah Duo left, Maomao sighed as she looked at Consort Riishu.

Consort Riishu's eyes were glazed over.

"The other consorts have given birth. I have to do so too."

Maomao whispered.

“It can’t be helped with the seat of the empress. I just really have to quickly give birth to a boy now.”

Children are weak. You don’t know when they might die.

“Give birth as soon as possible. Why else did I come into the inner palace?”

As if she didn’t want to listen to Maomao’s speech, Consort Riishu covered her ears. However, she would have heard it.

It wasn’t that unusual for virgins to be scared of men. Maomao knew that very well, having always been in the shop that traded where that was an added value. Girls get sold to brothels before their coming of age in order to be brought up there, and in exchange for beautiful clothes and meals, they take up guests. Courtesans who took their first guest are given a first class meat dish to eat the day after. Even the miserly madam had that much kindness.

There was nothing to criticise about Riishu’s partner. Despite the age difference, her partner is the emperor. A great man with a beautiful beard. There was the point where he was somewhat overenergetic at night, but he shouldn’t force her.

However, on the reason where Consort Riishu was afraid of her first night with the emperor, Maomao also grasped that there was more to the fact that the consort was that kind of bothersome virgin.

How many people have noticed?

The emperor had probably also noticed it, she thought. That’s exactly why he had delayed it until now.

And one other important person hadn’t noticed that and was currently right in the middle of meddling.

Maomao sat down and sipped the already cold tea.

“If Ah Duo-sama is like a mother, then his majesty would have to be someone that’s like a father, right?”

Her words might be taken as disrespect, but there was only Maomao and Consort

Riishu here.

She heard that Consort Riishu's mother had already passed away. Her father only thought his daughter as a tool of politics and had put her into the inner palace when she was young.

At that time, it was no doubt that the Ah Duo, the crown prince's consort, was Consort Riishu's mental support.

Consort Riishu's lips and brows were twisted. She was about to cry even now. Despite that, she somehow sniffed and looked at Maomao.

"...I, really... wasn't supposed to return to the inner palace."

Consort Riishu strung her words together.

The father of the daughter who got put in a nunnery after the passing of the previous emperor had tried to use her again. From that start, she was supposed to have been sent away as a wife to the viceroy of the south, but that man was old enough to be her grandfather, and furthermore, it was said that though he lacked a wife, he was a pervert surrounded by ten concubines.

Consort Riishu is from a family lineage that had a name bestowed from the imperial family, the U_(卯, Mao.) Clan. However, it was said that the power of their merit-based name was weakened in the era of the Empress. Therefore, no matter what hand they used to try to promote themselves, it was the common consensus that their clan was beginning to go under.

"The people who stopped that was Ah Duo-sama and his majesty."

It was rumoured that Ah Duo, who had heard about Consort Riishu's engagement, had requested it to the emperor. Considering it now, she guessed that might have also been the policy. As their betrothal was nearly finalised, they will need a suitable reason to overturn it.

(It's no wonder.)

When compared to the other high ranked consorts, Consort Riishu will lose. Although she would say that she will lose to them, she didn't mean the consort's looks. She thought that her intelligence and spirit as a high-rank consort was lacking.

Will you have a maiden of tender years become the bride to some damned geezer, or have her attain the tranquil years even if it is just for a few years as a flower of the inner palace?

Ah Duo's choice would have to be the latter.

"A long time ago, the emperor sat me on his knee and cuddled me, you know."

"My goodness."

That was fine when she was young, but if he did that now, the owner of the flimsy heart would have ceased breathing just like that.

Hm, in this society, there are many marriages with age differences. It was a different matter if the woman is older, but it wasn't that unusual to have an older man. If they were asked the child on his back, "Is that your daughter?" there would be cases where they reply with "No, she's my wife."

In that kind of meaning, Ah Duo seemed to have thought that Consort Riishu would grow up after a few years. Like how she said it just then, if she became a wife of the gentleman who stood at the summit of the country, her treatment had no way of being bad.

(This is rough.)

Ah Duo's plan was off.

Consort Riishu was still a child. And within the reason for her wanting to be a child, there was Ah Duo.

Ah Duo wasn't a high ranked consort now, but she must still be someone who is by the side of his majesty though not in the company of Consort Riishu.

"I understand you can't see it apart, but it's your job."

Everyone in the inner palace received a salary. Consorts were the same.

"..."

However, Consort Riishu tugged her dress and her eyes moistened.

If he were to take such a consort as a partner, she would be inclined to think that it would be tough for the emperor. Though not to the point of Consort Riishu, the emperor who had delayed sleeping with her must also have the same sentiments.

At least, it would be better if Ah Duo noticed her feelings...

(Aaaahhh.)

What can I do, Maomao clutched her head.

Chapter 18

Ah Duo's Scheme

For the time being, since Ah Duo had asked her, Maomao did what she had been told precisely. She hadn't prepared anything, so she got them to take her to the Rokushoukan on a fast horse to pick up the teaching materials.

Perhaps due to the recent efforts for the diffusion of books, the price of erotic books seemed to be gradually decreasing. Though, even with that basis, it seems the madam still overcharged her.

Different to last time, she brought something that was a little atypical. Let's give up on putting what it is into tangible words. It's a little, no, there's nothing quite like it; when she took it out to show Consort Riishu, the consort made a face like she saw a cockroach and just retreated until her back touched the wall.

Since Maomao was at it, she also tried calling for Ah Duo, but the woman blatantly drew back. It seems that the former consort's night life back when she was the crown prince consort was extremely proper.

Since the children tried entering the room every now and then,

"Hey, it's too early for you."

Or,

"You can't look."

She covered their eyes and chased them back out.

During the lesson, blood rushed to the consort's head many times, so it was troubling. Each time, the head maid who came along with Consort Riishu tended to her.

She tried teaching her the programme that courtesans have before they take their first guest. Together with the tastes of guests, there was a certain job that was done

beforehand for courtesans.

“Want to try doing it?”

When she asked Consort Riishu, the consort immediately shook her head.

She'll also leave what kind of job it is to her imagination.

And so, the time the lesson ended was when the sun had already gone down. She was treated to dinner since she was at it. After that, Ah Dou also told her to stay overnight since it's already late.

(Should I decline?)

Since it was sudden, she would have to respect Maomao's will. Maomao wanted to compound medicine, and when she went out, Chou'u was noisy somehow. And the other day, he was also noisy when she went to the quack doctor's hometown.

(But then.)

Maomao decided to take up her invitation.



The food was tasty. The bath was spacious. The bed was warm and soft. It must be cotton that was stuffed in the futon – it was different from covering yourself with a sheet on top of a pile of straw mats.

Maomao was going to fall into a state of bliss, but she shook her head. “Not good, not good.”

She put on a jacket that had been prepared on top of her dressing gown and went out of the room. She only relayed to the outside guard that “I'm going out for a walk.” He would come along if it was suspicious, so she had no problems if he did so.

She shuffled along the corridor. It was called the emperor's villa; it was already gorgeous. The imperial court was right beside it, so the question of why the villa was built in such a place exists, but that would most likely have to be due to the atmosphere.

The tranquil atmosphere that was different to the inner palace and the imperial court flowed here. The children who have been creating a racket in the afternoon must be only making sounds of slumber now.

The courtyard was illuminated by moonlight. Maomao didn't understand the hobbies of the wealthy, but there was a large stone in the centre of the garden. It was bored with holes – she heard that it was good omen the more holes there were.

Leaning against it, was a person who was pouring herself a drink.

(She hasn't changed.)

Maomao sighed. It was this kind of setting last time as well. That time, she was on the top of the inner palace outer wall in the guise of a man just like then.

“Oh, have I been discovered?”

It was suitable for Ah Duo, whose hair merely tied up at the back, to be called a young man. Her body, which had few curves, emphasised her manliness all the more.

“Yeah. Aren't you cold?”

Instead of replying, Ah Duo showed her the wine. The alcoholic content seemed to be high – just drinking that would warm you up.

Ah Duo slapped the spot next to her, telling her to sit here. She carefully set down a towel for her.

“In that case, excuse me.”

Maomao said, not holding back. She didn't think that much would anger Ah Duo, and moreover, she rubbed her sleepy eyes.

Maybe because Ah Duo was close by, the guard waited a fair distance away. If he was that much far away from them, as long as he didn't have rabbit ears, he probably can't hear their voices.

Ah Duo was also the same in that thought.

“...so, what’s your business?”

“It’s helpful that we get to the point.”

In truth, she wanted to speak in a place that was a little warmer, but it wasn’t bad if there was wine. After Ah Duo passed her a cupful of wine, she drank directly from the gourd.

“May I speak hypothetically?”

“Go ahead.”

“What if Ah Duo-sama’s father is actually a stranger with no blood relation to you?”

Ah Duo scratched the back of her head roughly.

“My dad died before I was born. I didn’t have a stepfather. My mum raised me by being his majesty’s wet nurse.”

“It’s hypothetical. What would you think if that your dad told you that you must marry on a certain day?”

Who Maomao was talking about, would Ah Duo understand? She was worried about that, but it seems the woman understood.

Ah Duo scratched the tip of her nose, and then tugged her hair.

“...so that’s what it’s about huh.”

“Yeah, it’s about that.”

“I don’t think my father was that important though.”

Maomao was also the same, but at least, her adoptive father was a respectable existence. In this world, there were a great number of people who consider the relation between women and men to be the greatest. However, Maomao was one who didn’t think that was everything.

And one more thing.

She thought this was the greatest fault for Ah Duo.

“Isn’t it also the same with his majesty?”

At those words, Ah Duo blinked rapidly.

“...isn’t that fine? He paired up with the person who was like his older sister, you know.”

(Paired up, you say...)

She declared it. It was disrespect to the utmost. However, Ah Duo could say it because she is the emperor’s milk-sibling.

(Is that how it is?)

The emperor was like a younger brother to her. Even if he sported a splendid beard, even if he stood at the top of the country, he was her younger brother.

Ah Duo, who became the instructor for her younger brother, must have seen that through clearly. Because she could take it as such, she thought that others could do the same.

People believe that other people can do what they can do – that kind of thing.

(Younger brother huh)

She suddenly recalled that the emperor didn’t take in another consort when he was a crown prince aside from Ah Duo. And she was left in the inner palace even after when she was no longer able to have children.

“ ... ”

“What’s wrong.”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Ah Duo tilted her head.

What she didn’t know – Maomao thought that was cruel from that alone.

And it was also cruel to pretend not knowing.

“If she is something that’s like a daughter to me, she would also be like a daughter for his majesty huh.”

Ah Duo giggled, and put the gourd to her lips as if to swallow her laughter.

“But then, as this rate, I don’t want to have this daughter be in the position to feel ashamed in the inner palace.”

(That is natural.)

Although it was less than before, because she is a high ranked consort in name only, everyone looked down on Consort Riishu.

If you stand there, you can’t stand here. She was unable to have her way with it. This is common in this society.

“Even so, if there is something that’s unbearable, there is one other method.”

Glancing at Maomao, Ah Duo grinned. It was a somewhat mean expression.

Maomao didn’t have anything else to say. She only steadily emptied the contents of the cup.



It was a couple of days after she returned from Ah Duo’s villa. Maomao was sitting down by the riverside, looking at the greenery that was gentle for her eyes.

(Hm, a good feeling.)

Maomao picked up the mugwort that had been growing on the side of the road. Her basket had fuki buds and water dropwort. The horsetail had only just sprouted so she refrained from picking it.

She thought of bringing Chou’u along to have him help her, but she supposed that kid would mistake it with poisonous dropwort and pick it. She needed to teach him properly.

The soil near the river was fertile. Occasionally, she took walks outside the capital like so and pick wild herbs. Before, she got ahead of herself and went out too far, and got kidnapped and sold by human traffickers, but she was taking care that this sort of thing won't ever happen again hereafter.

There was a large outer wall surrounding the capital, but it was free to come and go by principle.

Around the capital, fields spread out along the main road.

In order to carry in the food supply to support the population of several ten thousand in the capital, it would be inconvenient to restrict movement.

Of course, large horse-drawn carriages operate by affirming their luggage, but Maomao dipped her head by the side of that and entered the capital.

The regulations of south gate, since it is directly connected to the pleasure district, are quite lax. Wagons loaded with bags of rice show wooden slips to the guards and enter.

Well then, what shall I do with the spoils I got from the riverside, Maomao thought. As the dropwort and fuki buds can make up for dinner, shall I use the mugwort for moxibustion or shall I make kusamochi – the possibilities of its use were endless.

And so, when she walked with a little bounce in her steps, someone grabbed her shoulders. And just like that, she was being dragged into the alleyway.

Although it's daytime, this place is the pleasure district. The public order is bad even if it's within the capital. Maomao, without a moment's delay, took out a clump of bitter medicine from her collar and pressed it towards the person's eyes.

"Ah..."

Hit by the medicine, the man who had dragged her in held his eyes with both hands and collapsed to the floor.

His appearance can be taken as a rouge, and yet she recognised him.

"What are you doing, Basen-sama?"

"That's what I want to ask you!"

As he rolled on the floor, Basen gushed out profanities.



Basen who was pressing his eyes with a damp cloth and Maomao moved places. She was going to head towards the Rokushoukan, but since Basen told her to “Stop”, she stopped. Even though his face couldn’t be seen, from his tone of voice, he had implored her with that earnestness. He seems he got terrified of getting his important thing snatched away by Pairin-nee-chan the other day.

Though Consort Riishu is the same, this man is this man so it’s problematic, Maomao thought. His father Gaoshun has already gotten a grandchild from another child, so it doesn’t seem like he would mind that much though.

Basen, seeming as though the pain in his eye has finally subsided, removed the towel.

“What’s this place? The stables?”

“My home.”

“...”

If the Rokushoukan was no good, there was no other place. Do you live in such a miserable house – he looked at her in pity.

“...are you, by any chance, in debt?”

“Umm, don’t worry about me.”

From the humble atmosphere, even after they came inside, he seemed to be pitying her again. *We can just go outside*, Maomao said as she brought in the hatchet stump. That was for Basen to sit on. Then she went to sit on top of the large stone that was over there.

There were no signs of life around them, so it should be no problem.

“What’s wrong?”

Normally, tomorrow or the day after would be fixed date Jinshi came. To have Basen show up before meant that there must be some urgent matter. To the extent that he had to purposely go out and look for Maomao.

“About that.”

With a complicated expression, he mumbled.

“If there’s nothing in particular, can I go do the washing?”

“Oi, wait a bit!”

Basen signed tremendously and drew his face towards Maomao.

“Hey, do you know what kind of person is Consort Riishu?”

“If it’s about that, it’ll be better if you ask Gaoshun-sama.”

It was a given that Gaoshun, who was always with Jinshi, would know more than Maomao.

He came to talk at a very good time.

“I’m troubled because I can’t do that.”

Basen said with a serious expression.

For Maomao, Gaoshun is outwardly stoic, but he is a rather experienced mischievous old man on the inside. He doesn’t show that side before his son, only projecting the image of the outstanding attendant of the imperial brother.

“Even if you ask me what.”

Her personality was timid, a crybaby, and she was still young in various respects, but if you say it in another way, she’s pure. Her likes were understandable from her youth, but she stimulated the urge to protect with her underlying cuteness.

“...is she really like that?”

“Why do you doubt that?”

Basen, eyes steady, with his arms crossed, beckoned Maomao to come closer.

“When Jinshi-sama, and Father heard her name, they looked reluctant.”

“About what?”

I can’t follow the conversation – Maomao tilted her head.

“Concerning her parentage, I was bothered that she was from the recently corrupted U Clan, but it’s not to be the point of refusing. No, it’s rather...”

“No, please don’t mutter to yourself.”

Playing innocent to what she normally did herself, Maomao said to the groaning Basen.

“...you won’t tell anyone?”

“If it’s like that, then I don’t particularly want to hear.”

“Oi, we’re all the way here, so I’m going to say it.”

Saying that, Basen whispered into Maomao’s ear.

“Consort Riishu bestowal talk has come up. Her partner is Jinshi-sama.”

“Oh my.”

So that’s what Ah Duo’s smile from the other day meant.
Maomao smacked her fist on her palm.

Chapter 19

Meeting, Part 1

Jinshi and Consort Riishu.

I see, Maomao thought.

In terms of age, it was perfect. Jinshi was twenty and Consort Riishu was sixteen. Appearance-wise, Jinshi was a little older, no, he's grown up, but it was all within the level of tolerance.

Jinshi was the imperial brother. Although the crown prince was currently Empress Gyokuyou's imperial prince, his right to succession was still high.

Rather than being in the emperor's inner palace where it was intense with the added competition, it might be better for her to have Jinshi who still hasn't married anyone.

Though she won't be able to become the empress dowager in the future, she could become the wife of the prime minister.

Of course, she might become the enemy of the country's women as well as a portion of men though.

As a no-risk choice, he was a partner that was too good to be true.

Those called powerful people must regard marriage with a clear-cut attitude. The freedom in romance that Pairin-nee-chan endorsed was equivalent to a fantasy.

Maomao stared at the person next to her.

Basen, Jinshi's milk sibling, would have to understand that as well. However, it seems he has some irritation that he couldn't relay properly in his heart.

To put it frankly-

(He resents his sister in law.)

It seems he wanted to verify with his own eyes whether she was appropriate for the beautiful, capable noble he served.

“Father didn’t make a good face.”

And it seems he got uneasy from that.

(I suppose so.)

To see it from the emperor’s perspective, he didn’t lay his hand on Consort Riishu who was like a daughter, and from Ah Duo’s, she had moved her to a place that was safer than the inner palace. For Consort Riishu, on top of the noble she admired being not a eunuch, as he was becoming her husband, she would have to be over the moon.

From Jinshi’s perspective, he wouldn’t mind it anyway with Consort Riishu herself. She was pretty, and in a couple of years she will grow up. She had no capability to speak of, but she probably won’t untactfully intrude on him. However, their blood relationship was slightly a bother, but that was something that more or less happens even when you get a wife from anywhere else.

“Don’t tell me, she might have some defect.”

Basen said, breathing roughly.

(Don’t call it defect.)

It’s a word that will have people gang up on you if they heard.

“That reminds me.”

Maomao looked at Basen, recalling.

“If you’re that interested, why don’t you go see her directly?”

Basen returned a displeased look to Maomao.

“I am not a eunuch.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

When she talked about Consort Riishu being at Ah Duo’s place temporarily, Basen’s face changed before her eyes.

He punched the shack.

(Don’t break it.)

Even if this house was this run-down, Maomao had an attachment to it. If it broke now, she would have to repick all the medicinal herbs she had gathered.

“Don’t shit with me! Do you think you can leave the inner palace this easily!”

“Even if you say that, it seems she got permission from his majesty.”

That saying, the inner palace wasn’t supposed to be a place you can freely come in and out as you will. It was more so for high ranked consorts. She should know that from recalling the incident with Consort Rouran.

On top of that, Consort Riishu said that she will be going shopping on the main road today. Honestly, even Maomao thought that the consort was going overboard, but that was also allowed by his majesty, and it seems there were guard coming along with her.

(They’re over pampering her.)

Therefore, Consort Riishu’s father must be getting cocky.

(Let’s shut up about that.)

So she thought, when Basen’s eyes zeroed right at her.

“Are you hiding something?”

“Could I be?”

When Maomao feigned ignorance, Basen pursed his lips and covered his eyes with his hand.

“Ow. Owowow.”

It was in an unnatural monotone.

“Because of that poison, my eyes, my eyes are weird.”

He said and his eyes flickered over to Maomao.
She was irritated from being looked at.

“No, that wasn’t poison.”

“No, my eyes are useless. I’ll be going blind at this rate.”

‘course not. She only put some bitter component in his eyes. It was fundamentally harmless since she had only just made it as a diversion. If she wanted to make him blind, Maomao would have compounded something nastier.

As he continued playing the ham actor, he glanced at Maomao.

(This man...)

It seems he has some playfulness in his straight-lacedness. However, he hadn’t reached the limits of his father Gaoshun. There was quite a bit of shyness. Rather, it was more embarrassing to watch him.

Maomao scratched her calf with her toes in a bother.

Since she made a mistake and pressed herbs into his eyes, she decided to confess honestly. Rather than that, Maomao was getting embarrassed from watching the cheap, overblown drama.

And so, she meant to voice that she was going out to shopping, but it goes without saying that she got caught up in something troublesome.



“What a consort! Geez.”

Basen stomped along the main road.

Maomao, with a clear expression of “Can we end this quickly?” followed three steps behind him.

Maomao had thought that she would be relieved from her post if she only spoke when she spoke, but it wasn’t the case.

Maomao was acquainted with both Ah Duo and Consort Riishu, but it wasn’t so for Basen. He had seen Ah Duo at the garden party from a distance, but he told her that he was never acquainted with Consort Riishu. It seems that during Consort Riishu’s attempted assassination incident, he was far away by chance and didn’t see her.

Also, he has never seen Ah Duo in her male disguise, so he will have a hard time finding her so he took Maomao along.

“Oi, what about the two people over there?”

“Don’t point at people.”

Not them, she shook her head, and Basen searched for the next people.

The main street becomes crowded in the afternoon from the market. Searching for Ah Duo amid that would be hard to do, and above all, Maomao was unmotivated.

(Rather, did they really go out?)

Since she heard that they are going out, Maomao had told Basen that. It’s because it is Basen that she did so, but normally, it wasn’t something you could freely talk about. That went for Maomao, and for Ah Duo too.

The inner palace was safer compared to town to dally around. There might be envy between women and quarrels between consorts, but it won’t develop to the extent of killing and wounding. Rather, if there were even fights, the eunuchs would quickly rush in to break it up.

And if there were, there were harassment and poison, but there were countermeasures in place so it would rarely lead to something serious. The possibility of getting food poisoning from a food cart in the market was higher.

(There would be guards coming along though.)

You don't know where there are eyes and ears.

"Don't walk so loudly. Other people will pick up on it."

When Maomao spoke, it seems his footsteps calmed down for a little. Basen only scrutinised his surroundings with his eyes.

If he were to look this bad, he could only look like a pathetic pickpocket who's looking for things to steal.

"We need to buy something in the market, otherwise people will think we're weird."

Saying that, Maomao pointed to the kushiyaki shop. "Okay," Basen went to line up at the cart.

"One?"

"..."

Basen bought two and gave Maomao one.

"This is delicious, you know."

"..."

Even though he ate it one bite, Basen went to line up again for another one. He truly had an easy to understand personality.

Seeming that he was opposed to eating while walking, they sat on the makeshift seats made from barrels on the site of the shop and ate.

"Are you thirsty?"

Maomao pointed to the shop that sold fruit juice next.

"..."

It was a bullseye, but as he seemed to dislike following Maomao's words at this rate, he passed that shop and went to buy fruit juice from the other beverage shop.

(Aahhh.)

However, the moment he drank that, Basen's face twisted violently, paled, and he hurried into the alleyway.

Maomao bought fruit juice and water from the shop she pointed to the first time, and entered the alleyway.

Basen had his hands on the wall, vomiting out what he just drank.

"Shall I stroke your back?"

"No way!"

"Do you want to drink water?"

"...Give it."

Basen chugged it all down, water dribbling down the side of his mouth.

"What the heck was that?"

Basen, who finally calmed down, asked her.

"The owner of that food cart is stingy. He acquires rotten fruit cheaply and makes juice from that. And it was also mixed with the leftover from the previous day and the day before that as well."

The squeezed juice had started to ferment, partly turning into something like wine. The whimsicals would find that tasty, but it wouldn't match the tastebuds of the elite like Basen.

"Close down that shop."

"If you close it down, it'll just move elsewhere."

Basen, suddenly tired, let out a sigh.

"Do you want to go back?"

“What are you talking about!”

Since he was still motivated, Maomao helplessly passed him another bottle of fruit juice to remove the bad taste from his mouth.

Though Basen took it, he squinted and sniffed it before he drank it slowly. It seems to be fine this time; his throat moved as he swallowed.

When he drank it all, Maomao took the empty bottle from Basen.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“The price of the beverage is included with the bottle. You get money back when you return it.”

Basen didn’t understand the money sense of the town, so it seems he didn’t realise that the fruit juice was expensive.

“This too,” Basen also gave her the bottle from the unappetising one. Rather than saying give me back my money, he disliked throwing it out as it is, so he must have given it to her.

What a profit, Maomao took that to get money from it, when Basen firmly grabbed her wrist.

“What’s wrong?”

“...I can hear something.”

“Hear?”

She could hear fine, but she couldn’t hear anything. She looked at Basen, thinking that he misheard, but he was already gone.

“I’m going to see what’s up!”

Only saying that, he dashed to the back of the alleyway.

Chapter 20

Meeting, Part 2

(He's fast.)

Maomao honestly thought.

However, that didn't mean that he was fast running in a straight line. It was like his speed didn't die down amid the narrow obstacle-ridden paths of the back streets from the many unused barrels.

(Oi oi, give me a break.)

Maomao left the bottles she was holding onto and chased after him.

It was a godsend that despite the twist and turns, the path was fundamentally straight. Even Maomao who had lived in the capital since birth didn't know all the roads.

(I don't really want to go here though.)

Rat-like scoundrels skulked around in places with little human traffic. These fellows either don't work at all or can't. However, they were full-fledged members of society by only being aware of turfs.

Could the sound that Basen heard be a turf war between those fellows?

(You didn't need to poke your nose into it.)

His thoughts are jumping a little too far ahead, isn't he, Maomao thought.

That moment, she heard the shriek of metal and a scream.

Maomao looked through the two forks in the path. She looked left and right, then veered towards the sound. She headed right.

(!?)

There was a plaza at the end of the bend. There was a storehouse at the back. She could see human figures before it.

One, two, three...

(Seven people huh.)

The thugs were attacking two men. Basen involved himself into the original two against four.

The two men were dressed as good townspeople. It looked like they were in the middle of getting robbed.

However, the blades in their hands were somewhat unrefined for self-defence. They were fighting with the thugs like they were protecting something.

The four thugs looked filthy, but their weapons were more specialised. There were no chips on their blades either.

As if he was going to settle it at that moment, it seems Basen had decided how he was going to act.

(Oi oi.)

Even though his mind and his hands were both empty. Just what was he planning?

Maomao thought as she hid herself behind the wall.

But then—.

It was the thug who fell first.

(!?)

Basen was gone. She thought he was gone, but then his shadow appeared behind the thugs.

She had no idea what he did. Only that another thug had fallen before she realised it.

She wasn't sure, but either of the two had to be done in by Basen. One was showing the whites of his eyes, and the other one trembled as he clutched his knee.

(Did it get broken?)

The leg was bent in a strange direction. It was broken, not twisted. His skill was too high to have done that in the space of a moment.

And during the interval Maomao observed them, it seems the last two were also finished.

She had no idea how he did it, but the rest of the thugs went flying. That moment, Basen twisted the thug's arm strangely. There was an unpleasant sound.

(No chance of recovery?)

All four thugs who had fallen to the ground had their joints broken.

Certainly, it was unnecessary to go easy on armed robbers, but she felt that he went too far by haphazardly going in to help people.

However, the two people Basen helped didn't thank him. They only got down on their knees.

(Huh?)

"You were quite careless."

"My deepest apologies."

One man lowered his head at Basen's words. The other one took out a cord from his breast pocket and tied up the fallen thugs.

It seems they knew each other.

"Basen-sama."

Maomao came out, her head tilted.

Basen ignored her and went into the storehouse.

“Inside?”

“Y-yes.”

She saw the man cover his mouth reflexively. With a face that wanted to say that there are limits to sloppiness, Basen strode off.

(...)

Maomao also hurried after Basen.

Basen violently threw open the doors of the storehouse. She could see the shadow of someone huddled inside.

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

There was a pretty town girl. No, for a town girl, she was much too perfect, a fine jewel. A girl, where a maiden that is highly recommended by a pimp couldn't compare.

Of course, there was no way this was a normal girl.

(Oh yeah, normally, she's considerably beautiful.)

She tended to forget while she was in the inner palace. The dazzling flower garden – no matter how beautiful a flower, they will pretty much get overshadowed when they get surrounded by bigger flowers.

Consort Riishu was there.

She got it. The men outside were the consort's guards; they would have to be military officials or something. No doubt they would also be acquainted with Basen.

And so, it was as Maomao had worried. Was the consort's outing leaked? Or did she happen to meet robbers by chance? It would probably have to be the former.

Whether it be a raid for weapons or they were driven into a dead-end in the back of

the alleyway, she couldn't see it as a random crime.

Consort Riishu wasn't wearing her usual gorgeous dress. Nonetheless, she was wearing clothes that were worn by the daughter of a large business. Maybe she had been shivering the whole time inside the cramped storehouse, when they opened the door, there was a burst of perfume fragrance.

The corner of her eyes that had less makeup than usual was filled with more tears than usual. Her lips were twisted. Her whole body was shuddering.

Her eyes were dyed with terror.

Basen, who was lit up from the back, was reflected in Consort Riishu's eyes.

Even though Basen should have also said something, he was just standing. At this rate, the timid Consort Riishu might just wet herself while her face is covered with snot in her fear.

The exasperated Maomao showed her face from behind Basen.

"Are you hurt?"

Absolutely naturally, Maomao made a smile to ease the consort's nervousness.

However, Consort Riishu drew back like she was bristling. "Eek!" She inadvertently raised her voice.

Oh now, isn't this worse then she saw Basen, Maomao thought as she crouched down for the time being, and wilfully looked to see if she was hurt. Though her clothes were dirty in places, she didn't seem to have any external injuries.

As if she finally calmed down, Consort Riishu's stiff face gradually eased.

It was just that her face seemed feverish. Could it be that she got suddenly worn out after her tension was eased – she looked a little dazed.

"Basen-sama."

Maomao looked at Basen.

She couldn't see his face properly with the backlighting, but she knew that his tension still hasn't gone down.

"I'll leave her to you for a little while. I'll go help with dealing with them over there."

Leaving with a stiff tone, Basen headed towards the guards.

It seems Maomao had a slightly wrong impression about Basen.

She had thought that he was Jinshi's close aide because he is Gaoshun's son, Jinshi's milk-sibling. His essence was straightforward and impulsive, but with his youth as well, she had always thought that he was waiting to grow up.

(No way for that?)

Honestly, she thought that Basen wasn't capable. Or rather, she thought that he was a simple person that was easy to deal with.

Let's amend that.

Certainly, on the civil side of things, she felt that he was a little lacking to work for Jinshi. Of course, she thought that he is perfectly outstanding compared to a civil officer of the same age. However, it wasn't enough with just that.

Unfortunately, it appears his talent was more on the military side of things. There was no way you can easily defeat four thugs barehandedly. However, Basen did away with it with movements like he was breathing.

Maomao, who had no idea about martial arts, also knew that much.

Which reminds her, it had been Basen who accompanied Jinshi when they headed off to suppress the Shi Clan, not Gaoshun. Since Jinshi returned with an injury on his face, Basen was hit by Gaoshun and his cheeks had swelled up.

However, Gaoshun must have also not put any guards with Jinshi because he doted on his son. Him hitting his son might have been because he had betrayed that trust.

(Let's tease him a little less.)

He doesn't look like the type to raise his hand at women, but for now, she got a better

opinion of him.

Even so, Maomao looked at Consort Riishu.

“Are you okay?”

“Eh, ye-yeah.”

I-I’m fine, Consort Riishu’s face was redder than before.

And then her red face was turned towards the plaza, watching Basen who was giving directions to the guards.

“...”

She had an unpleasant premonition.

And that was most likely on the mark.

“...sama.”

The consort whispered something.

However, she couldn’t hear it properly. It was a knockout this time – it wasn’t something like that.

“So his name is Basen-sama...”

The thirty percent better looking Basen was projected in the consort’s teary eyes.

(...can we stop here?)

Consort Riishu’s face had become the extremely bothersome maiden.

Chapter 21

Bewilderment and Confusion

The world is full of matters that don't go well at all.

And when it gets into the heart, it doesn't just not go well, but also twists, tangles and throws you into mayhem.

I should think of things more lightheartedly, straightforwardly, and simply, Maomao thought.

As she examined Basen's tension-lined face.

Could the wrinkles on his brows be the deepest it has ever been? It surpassed his father Gaoshun's – setting a new record.

Maomao sipped tea as she watched the sour-faced man. For dimsum, they had sesame balls – the outside was covered with sesame seeds and the inside had sesame paste filling. The sesame filling being not so sweet might have been a consideration for Basen, but Maomao was into this mild sweetness.

She took her second one, split it with a bamboo spoon, and ate it.

They were in the guestroom of Ah Duo's villa.

Ah Duo quickly came to pick them up after that riot. Consort Riishu's head maid had rushed towards the consort who must have been scared.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a consort who was pale from fear. Only a bothersome maiden of marriageable age who was wrapped up in a strange fantasy.

And that maiden of marriageable age was looking towards this man.

(Mhm.)

Maomao stared at Basen.

She heard that he was the same age as Jinshi, so he's twenty huh. Unlike Jinshi, he looked his age.

His height should be around five shaku seven sun (170cm). He might be a little short for a military official, but it was possible that he might grow a little more.

His looks resembled Gaoshun, so it wasn't bad, but he didn't have enough of that overwhelming refinement. It would be better if he was a little more composed, but he exuded inexperience.

However, young people his age would generally be something like this, right? Maomao thought. Of course, when she considered the person he worked for, she knew that it wasn't good enough with that, but-

The person himself wasn't bad.

Considering that he was in the Ma Clan, he was bestowed a single character name.

And this skill from the martial arts she saw before was commendable. He defeated several armed opponents barehanded. That wasn't something that was as simple as it looked.

To start with, people get scared.

A long time ago, a manservant had told her that by just having them wield a blade, you'll falter from the fear of the possibility of getting stabbed.

However, Basen, who took them down without showing even an ounce of that, must have that much skill.

(It's probably, from that.)

That he was assigned beside Jinshi.

She was mistaken in the thought that this man always a civil official type assistant. His current duty seemed to encompass that too, but frankly, it didn't suit his character.

Despite the fact that it suited this man more to be thrown into the military.

(Unexpectedly, his personality might match someone like Rihaku.)

As she thought along those lines, her head was lifted up. "Mm?"

Maomao become somewhat awkward, looking at the sesame ball plate.

"What?"

"No, it is okay if I take a sesame ball?"

"Suit yourself."

Since there were five balls, it meant that Maomao will be eating one more. She was honestly full from eating two, but she somehow ate her third one.

Basen was moaning and groaning, looking outside as he sighed in a way unbecoming of him.

(What is with this atmosphere?)

I want to have anyone as a conversation partner at least, Maomao thought. That noisy brat would be fine too on this occasion.

When she thought about that, Ah Duo finally entered the guestroom.

The woman bowed deeply right after she came in.

"Wh-what are you doing!"

Basen raised his head in a fluster.

From the look of things, although she is a former high ranked consort, Ah Duo still has power, Maomao thought.

Honestly, she had no idea who was higher ranked. She somehow grasped from the atmosphere that her side felt more important.

"Thank you very much for saving Consort Riishu."

"I understand that. Please raise your hethh!"

(Ah, he fumbled.)

This doesn't look good – Maomao looked at Ah Duo.

Ah Duo looked at Maomao and nodded as if she was permitting her to speak. She decided to talk.

“Why did you use Consort Riishu as bait?”

Maomao asked, point-blank.

“How sharp.”

Ah Duo smiled without it reaching her eyes, and slowly sat down in the chair.

Maomao knew that the woman was implying don't stick your nose into it. She had considered how she could escape from that, but as a result, her discretion couldn't get through to the woman.

Hence, she asked this question.

“Is it okay for me to be here?”

At that, Ah Duo grinned and grabbed her hand.

It was like she was saying – *Don't run away.*



There had been something suspicious about it from the start.

Even if she had obtained the emperor's permission, a high ranked consort has left the inner palace.

Moreover, aside from going out to the streets, the consort had spoken to Maomao who was originally an outsider.

And Consort Riishu was practically assaulted in the back alleys. Furthermore, she only

had two guards with her. And let alone Ah Duo, even the consort's head maid wasn't by her side.

If that was not abnormal, then what else should Maomao call it?

"Consort Riishu's life was targeted on that street."

Since Ah Duo going to pour herself some tea, Maomao reached for it first, snatched away the teapot and poured tea for her. Perhaps it was due to Honnyan having worked her hard at the Jade Palace, she acted naturally.

"I don't know who it is. I just decided to take drastic measures to eliminate the consort's unease," Ah Duo said.

"Is that so? Drastic measures, is it?"

Maomao heard a reply that sounded like a criticism somewhere, so she covered her own mouth in reflex. No, she was wrong. The voice wasn't from Maomao. It was Basen.

The wrinkles on his brow were in the midst of setting a new record. There were two new lines.

"So that's why you treated the delicate and dainty consort like bait?" he said.

(Delicate and *dainty*...)

Certainly, Consort Riishu was delicate. Beyond delicate, her appearance was charming so there's no problems with calling her dainty.

However, those words had come from that Basen's mouth.

From the man who has kept asking Maomao about whether Consort Riishu was suitable to be the main wife or not. That man.

Delicate aside, isn't it a little out of place to say dainty?

Moreover.

"Aren't the guards who were with her at that place newcomers who only came in last

year?" Basen said.

"Ohh, there were acquaintances huh." Ah Duo laughed in amusement.

"They were unsuitable to be the consort's guards. And furthermore." Basen paused as though he was hesitating, and continued. "Shouldn't you be coming out earlier if she was guarded to that extent? Then what was that supposed to mean?"

Maomao widened her eyes at Basen's words.

"Oh, you noticed it huh."

Ah Duo nodded as she stroked her chin. Her actions reminded Maomao of the emperor in some respects. Was the resemblance somehow because they have lived the longest together as husband and wife?

(So in other words, they had been watching while in hiding?)

Maomao didn't notice at all. On the contrary, those guards and thugs probably hadn't noticed either.

"Isn't it somehow too reckless to bring it to light in this manner?" Basen said tersely. He was speaking while paying respect to Ah Duo.

(Mhm, plus one point.)

Maomao wilfully evaluated Basen. Currently, he was in a delicate situation with sixty points out of a hundred.

"At that rate, I might reach out for the consort."

At his words, Ah Duo jolted in surprise.

Unfortunately, Basen didn't have the character for detail to the point of reading her reaction. Even if he continued to speak like that, Ah Duo would continue to evade him, so it was a fail.

(Minus two points.)

As she muttered that in her head, she decided to lend him a bit of a hand.

Maomao raised her hand slightly. Ah Duo nodded.

“May I ask one question?” Maomao asked.

“What?”

“Just who is targeting Consort Riishu?”

First, it was that question.

Honestly, she would still understand if Empress Gyokuyou or Consort Rifa was being targeted. However, there was no reason to target Consort Riishu who the emperor has not even visited.

“...”

No, wait.

Rather, wouldn't you be aiming for her life because of that?

Even if he still had a scar on his cheek, that lord's beauty didn't wane. Rather, didn't it cultivate a fresh layer of wildness to him?

As if she read Maomao's speculation, Ah Duo laughed. “Haha. It's because Zui(瑞, rui.) is popular.”

(Zui?)

Who is that? She tilted her head, when Basen nudged her with his elbow.

“That's Jinshi-sama,” he told her.

I see, Maomao clapped her hands. Speaking of that, that was an alias, but honestly, she never called him by his real name, so she didn't remember.

“He isn't just popular in this country.” Ah Duo said and took out a folded sheet of paper from her collar. She unfolded the paper that had been folded four times. It was a map.

With this country, Rii, at the centre, there was the island country of the east, vassal states scattered around the four directions, then the countries further north and west. If you go further west from that, it would connect to the country that her dad had studied abroad in.

“There are countries that really want to be friendly with us. Moreover, there were talks of having that country’s woman as his wife,” she explained.

“...and then, what about Consort Riishu?” Maomao asked.

“Yeah, when we declined, we said that it would be better to have a suitable partner. It was just the right time.”

(...)

What is with the speed of this?

Then what was the various things said about the matter about consummation up until a couple of days ago – Maomao tilted her head.

It’s fine if the switchover was fast, but honestly, Maomao couldn’t follow. Could it be that there’s already an alternative – it might have been decided after that.

“And then, have you already told the matter to the other party?” Maomao asked.

“No, not yet. Though they could have already heard,” Ah Duo replied.

(A spy?)

It seems she had purposely let them go.

What a scary lady, Maomao thought.

“However, isn’t the timing too short for them to aim for her life?” Basen asked.

Maomao also sensed what Basen had said.

And even if Consort Riishu disappeared, honestly, they can probably choose another partner at their own discretion. Above all, it would be better if it’s the emperor or the crown prince, but the partner was the imperial brother. Considering the point in

favour of going that far, she could only think that they would have charmed by Jinshi.

(It can't be.)

It's a different thing if they saw the actual person, but that couldn't be, Maomao thought.

"...that's why," Ah Duo said slowly in a deep voice. "This proposal was from Consort Riishu."



Consort Riishu is a pitiful consort.

Her mother passed away when she was young, and her father married a second wife soon after. It was said that the second wife was originally her father's concubine, and there was already a half-sibling.

Her original parents were second cousins. Her father entered her mother's family, the main family of the U Clan.

Though the family structure resembled the Shi Clan, the difference was in the way they treated Consort Riishu, the daughter of the legal wife.

"It seems they doted on the daughter of the second wife more than the daughter of the legal wife. Apparently, they said that they will have the half-sister enter the inner palace this time."

"What is that supposed to mean!"

With enough vigour to knock the table, Basen stood up.

"Isn't the consort too pitiful?"

(Nonono.)

Even Maomao thought that she generally spoke everything about Consort Riishu. That it seems belated that the others said that they want to put the half-sister into the inner palace – that subject.

About why he would be angry about it this time.

Maomao felt a second unpleasant premonition.

However, it would be greatly troublesome to notice that, and moreover, she would be wrapped up in it, so she wanted to ignore it.

For now, let's leave this incident aside and return to the topic.

"Whether she's pitiful or what, if you say that, can't you say the same about the countless flowers in the inner palace?"

The words of one of the former flowers, Ah Duo, was laden with emotion.

Since they won't progress if Basen continues to speak, Maomao decided to add to the conversation.

"How does that connect with the incident where the consort was bait?"

"Yeah, about that."

Ah Duo lowered her gaze a little melancholically.

And then...

"She suggested that her life might be targeted by her father."

Ah Duo professed with a cynical look.

Chapter 22

Rumours and Bothersome Matters

It was extremely noisy inside the carriage on the way back.

Basen kept tapping his shoes. Needless to say, Consort Riishu was the cause of it. When Maomao saw his reaction, all her doubts went up in smoke, but it was troubling that way.

Consort Riishu was also, very much towards this guy.

“Basen-sama.”

“What?”

Basen looked at Maomao unhappily.

“From the appearance of things, Consort Riishu seems to have no problems. As the partner for Jinshi-sama.”

“...Ah, ye-yeah, no, we still don’t know...”

He stuttered.

“At least, won’t they be happier than they are now?”

“...”

Whether for Jinshi or for Consort Riishu.

When Maomao plastered on a fake smile, Basen bit his lip.

(And yet you found faults about other people.)

I want to think that you are bothering other people when you are beside yourself about

yourself.

Maomao played innocent to her own matters, stabbing it with needles.

The carriage stopped at the Rokushoukan first. In terms of distance from the villa, Basen's house was closer, but he had left his horse here.

She descended the carriage, thinking that since she had come along she wanted him to make up for today's share of pay.

When she did so, she noticed that there was a different carriage stopped by the Rokushoukan.

“ .. ”

“ .. ”

Maomao and Basen exchanged glances.

Cold sweat dripping, they descended from the carriage and stealthily peered through the gap of the window of the pharmacy.

And there, was a masked man who was sipping tea while being surrounded by high-class tea cakes.

(No, it should still be early for his visit.)

That's also why Basen had turned up today.

However, it was the unmistakable truth that that gentleman is here.

Judging from the variety of tea snacks, she grasped that he had been here for awhile.

Certainly, this atmosphere also got to Basen too. *This is bad* – his complexion changed. She didn't know what was bad, but she knew that it was bad. They crept over to the entrance of the Rokushoukan and snuck a look inside.

Gaoshun, whose brow was deep with wrinkles, was being followed by Chou'u.

They had planned to peek in secretly, but even their presence was enough for this military man.

His eyes snapped wide open. Then he stood up and rushed towards them.

Basen was frozen on the spot.

Gaoshun, who wordlessly approached them, was radiating pure rage. He bowed at Maomao, then grabbed his son's head with his right hand.

"My slightest apologies. Jinshi-sama is waiting, so I bid you to quickly head in."

"...yes."

Gaoshun said and dragged Basen outside.

Rather than a dog carrying his puppy by the scruff by his neck, it looked more like a raptor catching a wild rabbit – why was that?

For the time being, she saw them off like she was looking at a calf that was rocking the wagon.

Maomao entered the pharmacy.

She felt a piercing gaze. It was a clingy gaze that she could grasp even from beneath his mask.

"You took your time huh?"

(Since I didn't hear that you were coming.)

Maomao bowed her head slowly and entered the cramped room. He hadn't started with the tea snacks. She couldn't sit, so she asked him what he wanted to do with them. When he told her that he didn't want them, she gave it to Chou'u who was loitering outside. The kamuro gathered in a bustle and quickly finished them off.

"Basen?"

"He's being detained by Gaoshun-sama."

"...is that so."

He assumed a haughty posture, arms braced on his chin. Was it her imagination that

he looked sulky?

Maomao closed the door and he finally took off his mask.

Maomao took the salve out from the shelves. She had mixed several varieties of crude medicine and let it ferment for a couple of days, so it should be fine by now.

“Well then, excuse me.”

She knelt and scooped out some salve with a finger. The wound on Jinshi’s cheek was already healed, but there was still a scar. It might be better if only the stitching scar on his right cheek goes away.

Maomao gently smeared the viscous salve on Jinshi’s scar. She held her breath to not breathe on it.

His long lashes were lowered. The direction of his gaze was at Maomao’s finger. It looked like he was following the ball of the finger that was smearing salve onto his cheeks.

When she leaned closer to check the injury, his warm breath fell upon her.

(Is this guy a flower spirit?)

She thought that there was the faint fragrance of flowers. He had drunk rose tea. Yeah, it would have to be that – she was little relieved.

The salve was something prescribed by her dad a long time ago for a courtesan with a burn scar. While it didn’t make the scar vanish as soon as you smear it on, it promoted the growth of new skin.

There was new skin growth on Jinshi’s cheeks, but the redness stood out. She wanted to have it stand out less even for a little.

(He could have just smeared it on himself.)

Jinshi had Maomao apply this medicine for him each time. Did he have Suiren do it for him in his room?

Maomao was ticklish, so it would be all the better that she did it for herself. Was this because he’s an elite?

“Where did you go?”

“...to Ah Duo-sama’s.”

Basen would have admitted it anyhow, Maomao said honestly.

“...then-”

“Yeah, she welcomed me.”

She imagined what came after the then. That’s why, even if she didn’t add in the proper noun, Jinshi seemed to have understood.

“You seem to have a lot on your hands.”

Maomao emphasised that she was unrelated as she praised him.

“Yeah, the other side also has various things to consider.”

The other side – could he be talking about Consort Riishu’s family?

From hearing the story, it seems that Consort Riishu’s clan was structured like the Shi Clan. They were bestowed the single character name “U”.

If she remembered properly, she heard that the clans who received the single character names from the sexagenary cycle (More specifically, the earthly branches.) were the descendants of the retainers from the time this country flourished. In other words, it meant that Gaoshun’s Ma Clan was an ancient clan of the same esteem.

In the current time with the Shi Clan gone, she understood that they were making themselves look superior. She also understood that they were trying to obtain favour by sending their other daughter into court. It wasn’t that she didn’t also understand the bestowal talks of the high ranked consort who wasn’t the emperor’s taste to Jinshi.

However, the thing she was bothered about was–.

(Why is he aiming for his daughter’s life?)

No, that was what Consort Riishu had suggested. The possibility of that being a

mistake was also high.

However, in actuality, the consort was assaulted.

Was it a different subordinate?

Or was it-

One more thing.

About why Consort Riishu was being neglected by her father to that extent.

It can only be said that the matter where the high ranked consort got wedded to the previous emperor was sorrowful. Maomao understood that the consort's father had sent in his young daughter when he knew about the tastes of the lolicon emperor, but at that time, the previous emperor had been bedridden by illness.

Even if the consort was sent in at such a time, there would be hardly any possibility her of becoming a mistress.

Even though there was still another way to use her as a tool of politics.

"Oi, what are you pondering about?"

Jinshi looked at Maomao dubiously.

(Not good, not good.)

This incident is unrelated to Maomao.

It was uncouth for her to stick her head in it.

But.

"...Can I ask, one question?"

"What?"

She had a belated thought.

"About Ah Duo-sama. That person seems to have quite a rational personality, right?."

On how she devoted herself to being the emperor's instructor while thinking him as her younger brother, and on how she immediately advocated the talks between Jinshi and Consort Riishu.

The former consort was someone that is easy to use for Maomao, but there was also the part where she wanted the woman to understand people.

It was about why this person, among the others that were in the inner palace at the time, took Consort Riishu under her wing. Even though there were other girls who were brought into the inner palace for the same reasons, Crown Prince Consort hadn't considered about taking all of them under her wing.

There was one thing to consider from that.

"Did Consort Riishu and Ah Duo-sama know each other from before?"

"Your guess is good."

Jinshi made a look of slight embarrassment.

"Ah Duo-dono and Consort Riishu's mother were friends."

"Oh really."

"She was friends with his highness too."

"..."

When it comes to also being friends with his majesty the emperor, the question gets heated.

As boorish and uncouth thinking strikes the core of people, they would care nothing about same-sex friends and would talk about opposite gender relations differently.

To say nothing of it when the partner is the gentleman who stands at the top of the country.

As if he read Maomao's expression, Jinshi told her something that was difficult to take

in.

“At the time, Ah Duo-dono didn’t wish for a second child.”

And also, the emperor of that time was bedridden by illness, whereas the current emperor who was the crown prince then didn’t have another consort.

“I heard the Empress proposed some idea to the U Clan. Often times, under the Empress’ directions, the imperial child of the reigning emperor of those times had summoned the consort’s mother.”

In those times, although the consort’s mother had a husband called Uryuu, he was merely a groom she was given from blood relation after all. It was said the main family of the U Clan had other considerations, as said groom had a concubine from elsewhere and had begotten a child.

Maomao wanted to cover her ears, but unfortunately, she was held down by Jinshi who had noticed her doing so. Jinshi whispered into her ears so that only she could hear. The fragrance of perfume and the salve intermingled, tickling her nose with a peculiar scent.

“Is it okay for someone like me to hear this?”

“It’s a rumour. There’s no proof.”

However, this thing he called a rumour could be none other than truth for those who believe it. And if there were people in the vicinity – even more so when their characters are bad.

“Does Consort Riishu know about this?”

“Wouldn’t it be cruel to tell her?”

She got the answer to her question from before.

About why Consort Riishu is being ignored by her father.

Her anger boiled.

(What a bothersome bastard.)

What a narrowminded man.

While he goes to make a child himself from elsewhere, was it no good for his wife to do the same?

Whether this rumour was true or what – Maomao didn't know.

Ah Duo recommending Consort Riishu to the emperor – did that signify the rumour as false? Or was it that she didn't know about the rumour?

Does it mean that, with the emperor disliking sleeping with Consort Riishu, the rumour was true?

If so, considering how it would turn out with her betrothal with Jinshi, it would be a consanguineous marriage of the distinguished people. If they were a different gender, it didn't matter if they were uncle and niece or half-siblings.

It's just that it was pitiful for Consort Riishu to be the only one kept in the dark.

"What are you thinking of?"

"You're too close, Jinshi-sama."

Jinshi's lips were on Maomao's ears again.
The fragrance of rose tea was still in the air.

"What are you thinking of?"

"...for a better future for Consort Riishu."

She won't say make her happy.
That was beyond Maomao's realm.

"Jinshi-sama, please value Consort Riishu."

"...Right now, I'm driven by the need to grab the head that's right in front of me and rammed it into the wall."

Jinshi's voice was mixed with deep anger. He was also tugging Maomao's hair like he was going to pull it out.

"If you have to torture me, it would be better if you cut me. I want to avoid a fatal wound though."

If it's a cut, she had medicine she wanted to try out. This would be better than getting beaten up.

"This counter is new."

"Rather, Jinshi-sama, your return has gotten fast."

Normally, he would be slumping his shoulders with a single statement. Had he gotten a little tougher?

"I learned that it makes no progress."

Saying that, Jinshi drove her to the wall, still grabbing her hair. *Is he really going to slam me onto the wall?* She closed her eyes.

However, her head didn't hit the wall.

Her hair was tugged down; her face forced up.
And then, her lips touched something.

A tender rose tea breath entered Maomao. Her eyes opened from the sudden action. Her posture was back to normal; Jinshi had his back faced to her.

"..."

Maomao watched that back wordlessly.

Jinshi put on his mask without turning around and opened the door of the pharmacy.

"Oi, I'm leaving."

"Jinshi-sama."

“Wh-what?”

Since he was wearing the mask, she didn't know what kind of face he was making.

“Please don't forget the salve.”

Maomao wrapped the medicine up in cloth and passed it to Jinshi. He snatched it off her hands and left the pharmacy.

Outside, there was tired Basen looking like he got a lecture, and an even more tired Gaoshun despite being the angry one.

After seeing off the three people, Maomao closed the door and sighed.

She wiped her fingers over her lips.

“What a pain.”

Let's revise what she just said.

It's become difficult.

Chapter 23

The Western Merchants, Part 1

It was ten days after Jinshi's visit when she saw any progress on the matter about Consort Riishu. And on the topic of what the trigger was, it came from an unexpected personage's request.

"What's your business?"

"How cold of you. To speak to your adoptive brother like that."

"Huh? I don't have any siblings but."

There was a short man standing before Maomao. He had unruly hair and was wearing round glasses over his fox eyes, but aside from those, his face didn't really stand out.

Normally, she would let him into the pharmacy, but she was in the middle of compounding a lot of medicine, so she was borrowing the entrance of the still-closed Rokushoukan.

And if they were in such a conspicuous place, the cheeky brat will wander up to them.

"..."

"What?"

Maomao grabbed Chou'u's collar like it was the scruff of a kitten's neck. The boy, being the boy, was clutching onto maomao the cat with both hands. The cat with the superbly distasteful name was now living with them after that time. She couldn't throw it away as the courtesans liked it. It was despicable either way.

"Is this big bro Freckle's big bro?"

"Why?"

She had already said that he wasn't just now. Did he not hear?

“He looks a lot like Freckles.”

“ ... ”

Maomao narrowed her eyes. She carried him over to the head manservant Ukyou who was manning the entrance. That man, being that man, looked pained from the morning shift – yawning, he passed the boy over to the manservant apprentice Sazen.

Sazen made a blatantly bothered look, but seeing as though he had special feelings for the kid, seemed to agree to babysitting Chou’u without any complaints. As Chou’u currently wasn’t in the state to remember his past, they judged it shouldn’t be an issue. This man was handier than expected – helpful that he picks medicinal plants for her when he’s out on his walks. She thought to try to teach him how to make medicine eventually.

It was irritating that this man, Rahan, resembled Maomao a lot. If he eased his fox eyes a little, took off his glasses and changed genders, he would be two peas in a pod with Maomao.

It was really irritating.

“So, what’s your business?”

She returned to the topic. Rahan occasionally showed up at the Rokushoukan with that weirdo. Maomao only recognised him as an accessory of that unpleasant being.

If he had no issues with it, she supposed it would be fine to speak while standing here.

“Is the pharmacy free?”

“I’m currently in the middle of compounding a special medicine, so I can’t have people come in carelessly.”

That was a lie. It was just a pain to clean up.

Rahan took out a money bag from his breast pocket a little reluctantly. And then he placed coins on Maomao’s palm.

“With this paltry sum, the hag here can only lend you the overhang of the roof.”

“What a terrible miser.”

(Like you’re one to say.)

Maomao knew he came second after the madam here. Due to the fact that he had an outrageous relative, he won’t catch up with only the wages of an official, so he does various things on an extensive scale.

He unwillingly added coins, but Maomao shook her head. It was when he placed on three times the original sum did she finally nod and call for a kamuro nearby to summon the madam.

The kamuro quickly disappeared inside the shop, and soon after, a crone that looked like a wrinkled withered branch appeared.

“Gran, we’re renting a room.”

“This sum is enough for precisely a half-dual-hour.”

The madam said, holding the pipe in her mouth. She prodded the lit ashes with embers.

“It’s quite expensive.”

“In that case, it’s fine if you don’t use it. However, if you take her outside the shop, I’ll take that sum.”

Maomao wasn’t really the property of the Rokushoukan, so the madam didn’t have any rights to stop her if she went outside whenever she wished. However, it was frankly a pain to deal with Rahan, so she didn’t mention that. From the start, he had no rights to go into the pharmacy until she cleaned up.

The room the kamuro led them to was for middle-class courtesans when they take in guests. Since no one was using it now, they only laid out a mat as an apology on the bare wooden floor.

It looked painful to just sit on it directly, so Maomao brought seating cushions from the pharmacy and set two down. She gave him cushions for receptions but had no plans on even serving him tea.

The rooms of the Rokushoukan were made reliably as a standard. The walls were thick so sounds of love-making wouldn't leak out. There were guests that dislike it when the sounds leak, but they occasionally rent it out as a place for confidential talk.

"You know this individual?"

The same time the doors closed, Rahan took out a sheet of paper from his breast pocket. It was a portrait drawn with a fine brush.

"This is..."

It was the drawing of a woman. Since it was fine to call her a youthful maiden, she had noble features. Maomao wouldn't know if it was just that, but the comments stated, "red eyes, white hair, white skin". If it was like so, there was certainly one person that came to mind.

"If it's Lady Pai, a lot of people aside from me would know her."

"I guess so."

However, he showed her another sheet of paper.

"Who?"

This time, it was the portrait of a man. However, drawings were different to real people, and moreover, Maomao didn't try to remember faces of people she had no interest in.

In other words, she didn't know.

Rahan lined up the two portraits side by side.

(Mm?)

What could it be? She recalled something, but it didn't come up. Could this perhaps be a person she had seen before?

“The other day, this man appeared in a certain meeting. Of course, the person himself hadn’t intended for that to happen. It seems he was working behind the scenes.”

However, it was bad that he got visible for a mere instant. And he also got seen by the worse person.

“Among my esteemed father’s subordinates, there is one who can never forget a face he sees once.”

“I see.”

There would be no loss to possess such a special skill if you were the subordinate of that weirdo who can’t discriminate the faces of other people at all.

“That gossip-loving person went to see that Lady Pai’s show. It seems he was set up by the details of the talk. And also, his subordinate caught sight of the man on the portrait, when I borrowed him for a bit to come along to where I went to.”

This man, while being an official, worked on various businesses. It would have to be his meeting.

“When was it?”

“About two days ago.”

One day would be for making a request to the weirdo tactician. Then it would be for drawing the portrait, and after some more back and forth, would it be today for him to finally get around to her?

“And so, why did you come all the way here? Normally, I wouldn’t be related, right?”

“My business partner that time is a merchant from Sha’ou, you see.”

Sha’ou(砂欧), the country over the desert west of this country. Aside from the mountains in the south, it was situated with a larger country looking over it in three directions. It feels small at a glance, but if you take the opposing argument, it was formed as a centre of trade.

Maomao's face dimmed.

"...isn't, that bad?"

"It would be bad if you think about it normally, yeah."

This fellow, who did various things in the capital, was currently associating with a foreign country.

Even Maomao who wasn't interested in politics knew that it would be bad to be a foreign country that is surrounded by its enemy.

"Furthermore, the national character of Sha'ou is a place of non-aggression."

In other words, even if you try to arrest him as a criminal, they cannot move as they will.

"Normally, you cannot make a move."

If they were merchants who went out of their way to come all the way to this country, it would be difficult to think that they aren't moving in line with their country.

"It's troubling since I can't say anything about it."

After all, it was that one subordinate with the good memory who is the evidence. Even if that person himself gave a speech, the others would say that he could've seen it wrong if he was the only one who had seen it.

And it seems, as a result, he came around to Maomao.

"And so?"

"I want you to come along as a food taster."

In other words, leaving whether that aforementioned man is the actual person or not aside, Rahan was unable to turn it down with the reason that it is an important business discussion. But he wanted to protect his own person.

If that man was the real thing, could that Lady Pai be together with him as well? If that's the case, there was also the possibility that they would serve a yet unknown poison created through alchemy.

“You’re interested, right? You might even encounter unusual poisons.”

What an unfair hand.

Does he mean to pull Maomao by saying that?

However, there was one concern.

“What about that man?”

“Worry not, he won’t be coming along for this and I won’t talk about your going either.

It was needless to point out that man was that weirdo.

However, it was also irritating to have him reply as is here.

“Isn’t there my dad?”

The dad she was talking about here is Ruomen. Even if you make a mistake, he wasn’t a weirdo.

She gave a mean smile.

Compared to Maomao, her dad would know more about western poisons.

“Even though my esteemed adoptive father is in the medical office every time?”

Generally, it was a different matter if it’s a neighbourhood pharmacist, but there’s no way you can take an imperial court physician out as you please.

And so, Rahan showed up to bring the neighbourhood pharmacist.

“I’ll pay you.”

“I can’t believe the words of a miser.”

“You’ll get to see western medicine.”

“Can’t be helped.”

She said, and so, Maomao will be travelling with him, though–



“ .. ”

She watched in a daze.

An average built middle-aged man was standing there.
He was conversing with Rahan.

“And so, Uryuu-sama.”

She felt that she heard a name she recognised.

Maomao wanted to have not heard it, but she heard the name many times. It seems that he was entrusted with this occasion.

Every last one of them neglected their principal occupation, she thought, but the talks won't proceed with just merchants.

(You should just get poisoned.)

As she considered something unbecoming for a food taster, Maomao sighed.

Chapter 24

The Western Merchants, Part 2

The business discussion will be held in a small province west of the capital that is sandwiched between Kaou Province(華央州, Ka Central Province) and Seii Province(西威州, Western I Province). Maomao heard the name of the province, but she didn't try to memorise it since she had no intentions of doing so.

It took about ten days for them to get there, by going upriver by boat then changing to carriage. Even though the presence of Spring was getting stronger, she couldn't feel the change of seasons in the desiccating steppe area.

Maomao was shown into a room in the estate that was to be used for the business discussion. It was too splendid for a servant to use, so she was also provided clothes that were more splendid than usual. *How thoughtful of the stingy Rakan*, she thought, but it seems to be the necessary expenses.

Since she will be leaving the capital for a period close to a month, she had told everyone. The madam's expression was grave, but when Maomao handed over the golden snacks, the crone's cheeks eased into a smile of delight. *This is also a necessary expense*, Rahan had said, but he looked somewhat vexed.

The discussions with the Sha'ou merchants will be tomorrow. Until then, Rahan moved about as if he's busy and the man called Uryuu also seemed busy as is.

According to what she overheard, it seems Uryuu was originally chosen as the adopted son-in-law due to his business sense. The U Clan in those days was apparently in grave states so it must have been a blessing for them that there was a second son of a wealthy merchant who was distantly related to them.

Maomao looked out the window. The view was good from the third storey.

Unlike the capital, houses constructed of a lot of stone and bricks stood out. There was a pond in the garden. She could see lush vegetation, but the greenery outside the estate was sparse.

If you head a little west, it spreads out into a desert.

The desiccating breeze caressed her cheeks.

There doesn't seem to be a lot of interesting plants.

Maomao gazed out in boredom.

(Shall I go catch some scorpions?)

Scorpions seem to live here – she was advised to check her shoes before she wore them when she woke up.

Nonetheless, they were holding a discussion in a delicate place.

The discussions from the other day had been held in the capital, but it seems that was something that had been arranged beforehand. Since the real big shot will show up this time, they decided to hold the discussions in this town rather than the capital.

Considering the geographic condition, she thought that they should do it in the more-developed Seii Province, but they would be involved with some bothersome matters there.

(The U Clan huh.)

This Uryuu person who had tried to send his own daughters into the inner palace must see Seii Province as an eyesore.

That place was the hometown of the current main wife, Empress Gyokuyou. Maomao thought that normally he didn't need to purposely protrude and leave it to them, but would this be a sense of competition?

Even though that Uryuu had come along out of duty to negotiate with the merchants like so, Maomao had a single thought.

It was about Empress Gyokuyou's family.

The truth was that the empress' family didn't even have a conferred name. Could it be due to the fact that they were from a remote place, so there had been no opportunity

for them to be conferred a name from the imperial family? Even if their family was large, it seems that, from the fact that they didn't have a name, their slight gravity was different.

The barbarian princess was born from such a family. That is, Empress Gyokuyou is a princess flowing with foreign blood, but that was also an issue. It could be that Empress Gyokuyou is the child of a concubine or an adopted daughter that had been taken in from a distant relative. The foreigners in the western territory are mostly merchants or performers.

She didn't think that there was a problem with Empress Gyokuyou's education. The empress was still young at twenty-one years, but Maomao knew her intelligence and determination very well.

However, everyone else probably wouldn't hold the antipathy to treat the woman, who was only twenty-one, lacking a name, and possessing foreign blood, as the empress.

(Why is it this sort of pretence again?)

At least, wouldn't it be fine in another couple of years? Although the empress had given birth to the crown prince, the child was still young. Honestly, no matter how carefully you handle very young infants, they die easily.

Maomao didn't know much about politics, but she had also noticed that regardless.

(Since that province runs along the national border huh.)

About the big shot's expectation – she thought that she would just get tired by pondering about it.

Maomao made a big stretch and fell onto the bed. The futon was warm, woven with wool. Since it would suddenly get cold at night, this futon was a godsend.

She rolled around on the bed, and there was knock on the door from outside.

(Ah, is it already time?)

Maomao got up, smoothed out the wrinkles on her clothes and left her room.



Maomao looked at the cooking that was served on the plate before her eyes.

“This too.”

The plates on the tray were vibrantly hued. They had used valuable vegetables here, garnishing the colours. It was a dish that was made with mutton as the core.

Maomao glanced at the kitchen.

She didn't see anything strange in the raw materials.

Is there anything moving strangely inside the dishes?

She looked at it.

Appearance-wise, it was most suspicious to have a seat prepared for her to just study the dishes.

However, she wasn't going to mention that “I'm looking since I'm worried that you'll add any strange things,” and the other party also understood so they kept silent.

Thus the gazes pointed at Maomao were sharp, but she shouldn't mind them at all.

(Houhou.)

If the land is different, the cuisines are also different.

It was interesting to see their ingredients.

The food staple was bread primarily made from wheat. They also used rice, but rather than congee, they cooked it with ingredients and added flavouring. It seems they also cooked buckwheat grains like they did with rice, but it wasn't something familiar to the central region, so they didn't make any for them. Maomao was glad about it that way.

There were also noodles – boiled with mutton. In order to remove the gamey stink, they are commonly garnished with potherbs.

Honestly speaking, the cooking of this area had a lot of peculiarities. Maomao wasn't

really perturbed by it, but the big shots were complaining. About how the broth with goat milk is spoiled, or that they want to eat something other than mutton and goat.

If Maomao didn't observe them properly like this, she thought they might end up spitting.

Nonetheless, since they were pros who did what they could do, it seems they procured a new ingredient today.

Chicken and fish, and could that be dried fruit in the basket? *It's hard to obtain fish here*, Maomao thought.

During the time she observed the food like so, it seems the evening meal was ready. They will be carried over in wagons.

Maomao followed the servant who transported that.

The meal will be eaten in the hall of the estate.

You sit on the carpets that had been laid out. Large platters of food were placed in the centre.

The people of the central region probably wouldn't like this setup.

"The eating ways of a savage tribe huh."

There were those who spoke ill of it that way.

This must have been done to resemble the eating manner of nomadic tribes. It was a cause to eat not with chopsticks, but with bare hands.

Maomao sat down half a step behind, next to Rahan who had already sat down. There's a custom that dislikes having women in the same seat, but Maomao was being treated as a guest. Uryuu was inside, and the one sitting close by would have to be the lord of this town.

It was a manly man who was growing a bushy beard. Maomao didn't need to remember him, so she didn't even remember his name.

Around them were women who bravely looked after them. When the platters were

cleared, they would serve up the next dish, but unfortunately, Uryuu had no appetite. He only went for the lamb on the bone and boiled rice, and afterwards, he refused everything else aside from seconds for wine.

Rahan seemed to have taken a liking to the fish dish – that was all he was eating. The cooks, as if they lack confidence, looked relieved.

Maomao also helped herself with some of the fish. The was a blueback fish that had been pickled in salt, so the preservation must have been effective. It had a slightly peculiar stench, but that was probably the smell of fermentation rather than rot.

For one who was used to eating fresh fish in the capital, it might be unsatisfactory, but it must be good for Rahan who didn't mind it over the stink of mutton.

Maomao, who didn't mind the stink, ate everything without exception.

Since there was no food tasting or anything with this meal pattern, there was no other way than to eat a little bit of everything at the start and see if there's anything weird in it.

(From the way it looks, it would have to be that kind of meal pattern.)

Sha'ou is an area with a lot of nomadic tribes. Culturally, they would have to be similar to this place.

For the portions where you don't know who will eat, expecting that, you will need to pay attention to the servants. Also, you will have to know what kind of ingredient is in it, otherwise it is likely that you can mistake potherbs with poisonous plants.

Due to that, she had to eat while remembering the taste and appearance of the dishes.

She chewed, and when she saw a cup of wine placed next to her, she thought, "What a thoughtful servant". It was set down by the man who was sitting next to her.

The wine had been poured by the servant, but it seems the person himself doesn't drink.

It was a man in his thirties with slender, nice looks.

She was pretty sure this man would have to be the subordinate of the weirdo tactician

that Rahan had mentioned. His name was...

“..”

She couldn't remember.

“It's Rikuson.”

“Rikuson-sama.”

“Please drop the title, Lady Maomao.”

When she was called “lady”, Maomao contorted her face with all her might. However, since it was also irritating to correct him, she offered this condition.

“Then just Rikuson.”

“Then just Maomao. Since I can't drink, I'll be happy if you drink this though.”

Since he told her that, she had no reason to hold back.

(Since it'll be bothersome if there is something weird in the wine.)

Maomao raised the cup to her lips. Grape wine. It wasn't that strong. *The cooking aside, the wine isn't bad*, Maomao thought. However, unless you eat the cooking all the way, there was no reason for you to dull your taste buds.

After she drank some water and refreshed her palate, she went for the next dish.

The servants were postponing Maomao's share, so she had to get it herself.

“Is this one acceptable?”

“Thank you very much.”

It was Rikuson who presented Maomao what she wanted to get. He had properly portioned off a little for her.

It doesn't appear that he was merely following that weirdo tactician pointlessly. He

must be following that man because he paid full attention to things.

Rikuson frequently called the servants to a stop and indicated, "Take that for me, and this isn't enough."

At a glance, he looked like a slave driver, but his attention was directed to the faces and figures of the servants.

(Does he remember them?)

It seems Maomao didn't need to remember the faces of the servants.

She'll leave that to this man and focus on just remembering the taste of the cooking and the ingredients.

It was that moment.

She heard the crash of breaking crockery. She looked towards the sound. There was a panicking maid and Uryuu who had his hands raised overhead.

The lord was beside them, taken back by surprise.

"Didn't I tell you that I don't want it?"

"...my, my apologies."

The woman cleaned up the plate as she panicked. The plate had been pushed away, shattered when it hit the wall. The contents were scattered everywhere.

(What a waste.)

She must have wanted to have him eat the fish dish that had been specially prepared for him. It wasn't that Maomao didn't understand her feelings, but the servant overdid it.

The lord whispered into the ear of another servant as he fiddled with his beard. She wondered if that servant will be punished or fired.

It was a pity, but that can't be helped.

That's the way it is, Maomao continued to eat.

Chapter 25

The Western Merchants, Part 3

The discussions were held the day after.

It ended without a hitch.

As for why – Maomao wasn't invited to the discussion. She was only attending the dinner party.

Should she say that it ended while she was napping?

It seems this dinner party thing will be done in a western style, where everyone will eat while standing. She was told there would be various dishes set up on the table, and you carry a plate and take whatever dish that you like.

Honestly, she wasn't used to this style. But, there were also points to it where it will be easier to do that way.

Firstly, why this style? It seems to be customary to attend as male-female couples. It seems it is usual to bring a wife or a lover along, but in the case where you had none, you can bring your sister or a relative instead.

Rahan had introduced Maomao to everyone as his “younger sister”, but since she stomped on his toes, they settled on being relatives.

Secondly, it's both easy and difficult to serve poison. Since you don't know who was going to eat what, it wasn't suited to the assassination of a specific personage. Of course, that didn't matter if you are indiscriminative.

Finally, you won't feel out place even to food taste. You could just wait upon them at the side and peck at their food. Since it looks a little shameless if she did that, Rahan also kindly faked Maomao's age to be fifteen, the age of a growing child with a large appetite. Maomao, her expression unchanged, crushed the scot-free Rahan's toes.

If it's a style where it's fine whether you eat or not, it would be unpleasant as guests

to not eat at all.

“This was all just a preparation”

“Hmmm.”

Maomao answered in a relaxed-ish, unamused-ish expression.

“Nevertheless...”

Rahan ogled at Maomao.

“The fine feathers didn’t make fine birds huh.”

“Shut up.”

Maomao pulled her heavy skirt.

As the meals were also in western style, the clothes also matched the atmosphere. Of course, they didn’t prepare something that was completely the same but to have the figure resemble it, there was a frame inserted under the skirt to have it flare out at the waist. On top of the western dress, there was cinching at the hips and half the cleavage was on display, but unfortunately, since she looked shameless without that splendid meat, she wore large sleeves for her upper body and only tied a sash tautly at her waist.

They also had some wigs for hair – it was gorgeously exaggerated, but raw materials were raw materials. Originally, that shouldn’t be good, but everyone around her was an object of comparison that was more splendid than her. It was like a shepherd’s purse had mixed in among the roses and peonies.

“Worry not. You’ve reached the point of a dandelion.”

Why was that this cousin had good judgement for such a thing?

“ ... ”

She glared at Rahan with narrowed eyes as she entered the assembly hall.

(The ceiling is high huh.)

That was the first thing she thought.

The vastness was two times the entrance of the Rokushoukan, but as the ceiling was high, there was the feeling of openness.

One portion of it was made into an atrium, and layers of fabrics peculiar to this area dangled from the ceiling.

Despite wearing shoes, there were short pile carpets laid out. This would have to be a special product too. It's wasteful to get dirt onto it.

The quality and structure of the building weren't comparable to the capital. Nonetheless, she got the atmosphere that they were welcoming them with all their might.

For Maomao, who didn't know the real ways of the west, just this was something she had never seen before, but what would the other party think of it?

She thought that they would break out in sniggers, but when she thought hard about it, the other party was also people who lived in the sand, so they probably wouldn't mind it that much.

"For now, how about I eat whatever you have?"

"No, shouldn't you just follow me?"

"?"

What? What is this remark after inviting people to food taste?

She wanted him to take responsibility and prepare poison for her.

Separate to the displeased Maomao, Rahan watched the guests. Since it was standard to be in couples, there were a lot of women too.

" ... "

The fox eyes behind his glasses gleamed. Since Sha'ou was rampant with mixing blood, there were many beauties.

This scoundrel said – the numbers that beauties are composed of are beautiful. It wasn't that beauties are beautiful, it's the composing numbers that are beautiful – this guy had said something that was incomprehensible, but he's the nephew of the weirdo tactician, so he's also a weirdo. He was surely looking into a world that was incomputable for Maomao.

However, he rubbed his chin,

“If it's like that, the imperial brother is nicer.”

And calmly voiced something along those lines, so it wasn't that he understood the things comprising of a woman's heart.

Rahan suddenly looked at Maomao.

His appraising eyes must be looking at numbers that weren't nice.

“Hey.”

“Hah?”

It was entertaining that her attitude got unintentionally bad. This man wasn't one to mind that sort of thing.

Maomao accepted a cup of wine from a maid since she was at it. Red liquid was filled to the brim of the lapis lazuli glass.

It must be grape wine. The taste wasn't bad despite the sweetness. If she wasn't food tasting, it shouldn't be a problem even if she drank some wine.

“How about you ask the imperial brother to bear his seed?”

Could it be that Maomao was an adult so she didn't spit out the grape wine she had just drunk? The sweetness of the wine disappeared; she swallowed the liquid that suddenly got bitter.

Why? – she didn't need to return a question.

“In any case, you just want to try give birth. You're not interested in children, right? If it's the imperial brother's child, I'll raise them properly, so you can do whatever you want. It's not like I'm telling you to be his main wife. It'll be fine no matter how many mistakes you make. Even for me, getting an heir is a matter of great congratulations.”

"You go make it."

"I don't have an ideal partner after all."

It was likely that his ideal partner would be a beauty that is the female version of Jinshi who could cause the downfall of a country. That kind of person would have a tremendous talent to be able to have everything around them crash down.

"The imperial brother really such a waste. To have no one who can surpass his beauty even with that scar still there."

"I might as well just try to implant a woman's womb in you. How about that?"

"...can you?"

A serious-faced Rahan was scary. When Maomao replied, "No", he hung his head in slight disappointment. He's straight, but it seems he has no problems with changing his gender. She didn't really know his standards.

He must have considered that even if Jinshi was not good, he could just get someone similar if he could get someone give birth to the Jinshi's child. If it was Maomao's child, he could give a reason and take charge of them.

Also, though he said heir, what if the child was a daughter. Speaking of that-

"I'll take responsibility and support her until death, so don't worry."

In other words, he was saying that he will raise her and marry her.

She wanted to slander him as a lolicon, but he must be *that* attached to Jinshi's face. Since he was hopelessly no good, if she was ever asked if she knew anyone good, he will be the only one she won't introduce.

"And so, try asking him for me."

Maomao sculled the wine. Then she stepped on Rahan's toes, returned to the cup to him and walked off.

(Everyone is giant.)

When the mixing of blood is rampant, it seems you get taller too. There was also the point where people of the western regions were tall, but that aside, you'll have to be larger than your parents when you're a hybrid.

She didn't know how it was for humans, but when you cross fertilise similar species for plants, you get a larger specimen from those seeds.

If I have the time, I want to try that on my fields, she thought as she was going to go back. There was a wall around the small Rahan.

There were a woman and two men.

Among the men, one looked to be an interpreter, but the other seemed more like an attendant than the master. The one who looked the most important out of the three was the woman who was wearing clothes that emphasised her chest.

She was a beauty with bright hair and sky coloured eyes. She was tall, and yet she was wearing high heels.

“.....”

Maomao's eyes glanced over to Rahan's.

Come here. His fingers moved.

(Was it not a discussion with western merchants?)

The woman didn't feel like a merchant. She didn't have the air of a maiden either. If she was a lady, then there would be the husband rather than an attendant.

Speaking of which-

(The same kind as Empress Gyokuyou...)

Rather than business, it had the scent of politics.

(Is this the main topic?)

What western merchant, Maomao thought as she picked up her skirt and followed after Rahan.

Chapter 26

A Woman's Anticipation

In such a large estate, there would have to be one or two rooms just for clandestine meetings.

Rahan spoke to a server. And it was there where she would never forget how he took out a heavy thing from his breast pocket. It seems even he won't be stingy in times like this.

A short while later, the server brought a key over and guided them, "This way."

Maomao tilted her head, wondering if this was fine since it wasn't that secretive, but then Rahan whispered in her ear. "This is normal."

"Hmmm." She felt a little gloomy, but that can't be helped. Better bend than break – if there is this kind of rule, then you'll just have to abide by it. But then there's no meaning for him to be careful by taking the pains to have her food taste, right?

The room at the end of the corridor was really a room. There was wine, dried fruits and jerky on the roundtable – all of them contained components that made you feel vigorous. There was a couch and a bed – either of them was big enough to fit two people.

It seems a little cramped for five people, but the interpreter left his seat for them. Looks like he's going to keep a lookout outside. Now then, she wondered how they were going to communicate, when the woman spoke to them.

"Thank you for coming all the way to here."

Fluent words flowed out of her mouth.

"My name is Irene. My companion is my attendant. Please rest assured that he is tight-

lipped.”

“May I call you Airin-san? I am Kan Rahan. My companion is a relative so don’t mind her.”

Extremely simple self-introductions. If she had to say it, it was like a conversation where they verified the identity of the other party they already knew.

Rahan surveyed the room. Maomao rapped the wall lightly. There were no concerns about sound leaking from the room that had been constructed from stone. Perfect for clandestine meetings.

Rahan took out a sheet of paper from his breast pocket. He opened the wax seal. “I was surprised at first when I heard the talks will be with Sha’ou merchants. Is that serious, I had thought,” he said.

The attendant pulled out a seat in front of the roundtable. Airin looked at Rahan. Rahan grinned, urging her, and Airin sat.

Maomao didn’t know if that was the behaviour of an attendant or that was etiquette from Sha’ou, but Rahan also drew a seat back and gestured Maomao to sit. Maomao was against going along with him, but it was hard to stay standing for a long time so she decided to sit.

The attendant brought in a seat before she realised and Rahan set it down in a place that would be easy to sit.

After Rahan sat down, the attendant began to prepare drinks. It wasn’t something you can drink as is; it was diluted with water. Since it’s a strong spirit.

(Just what kind of talk is starting?)

There shouldn’t be a need for Maomao to be here, right? Apart from drinking wine, there was nothing for her to do. It would have to be no good to sleep just because there was a large bed, right?

However, the woman called Airin started to talk about something that forced Maomao wide awake.

“I’ll say it clearly since it’s hard to beat around the bush. Can you allow us to live in

your country?"

"...can you explain what you mean by that?" Rahan said as he pushed up his glasses.

It should be fine to just move here, right? It wasn't absent for foreign entertainers to become interested in other countries and just stay there. It was quite common for merchants too.

However, the woman before her eyes didn't look like an entertainer. And her air was different to a merchant's

"What's your reason?" he asked.

"Do you know the governing style of my country?" Airin asked.

At Airin's question, Maomao tilted her head. Maomao only had knowledge of how that country was used as an intermediary for trade.

This part, Rahan was quite able for it. "I heard that it is governed based on the oracle of the priestess."

The government does this and that according to divination. Even this country, Rii, had a couple of parts that rely on it, although the weight of it is small. The imperial court also has a post that specialises in divination.

"In truth, it is the god. The young girl is worshipped as the god, and her words become the voice of the god," Airin said.

It was something that was difficult to understand for Maomao. It was the same for Rahan. Both of them had characters where they believe what they see with their own eyes. However, they got the gist of it. Otherwise, they wouldn't cross over with society.

Rahan regarded Airin as he stroked his chin. "What I know, is that I heard that the current goddess has reigned for close to thirty years, though?"

From the fact that he was using "*I*_(watashi)" rather than "*I*_(boku)", Rahan must be recognising that this is a public place. In other words, he wasn't putting confidence into this woman.

At his question, Airan's expression shifted into a faint smile "Indeed, in the past, there are also those whose lives ended as gods. The current goddess' mark of a woman has yet to come. Thus, she still possesses the qualifications of a god."

In other words, her menarche hasn't come. There are cases where it comes extremely late, but if it hasn't come when she's past thirty, it probably wouldn't come at all.

"Normally, even if it's long, it will change in around ten years," Airin said.

She felt that Airin's words were filled with slight contempt.

"Even I might have sat there with that duty," she added.

Maomao understood the reasons for this woman to suggest her moving.

"Do you think the current government of Sha'ou moves with only the words of the goddess?" Airin continued.

It was a remark that struck the core of what happens afterwards.

"How will my country move when it is incited by the *North*?"

And then.

"What would happen if my country that is surrounded by sand is unable to buy food rations from other countries?"

Airin's sky coloured eyes faced them.



As soon as Maomao returned to her room, she threw off her peculiar dress. The clothes had something weird built-in, but more than that, her body suddenly got heavy.

Could the 'North' that the foreign woman called Airin had mentioned be Hoku'aren_(North Aren)?

Also, the reason she mentioned food would be...

(Is there already the fear of food shortages?)

Maomao violently wiped off her makeup and collapsed onto the bed.

The desert region procures its grains from other countries. It was difficult to obtain a steady food source from barren land.

From the looks of things, the North made a price hike for grains. The North suddenly raised the price of grains due to the locust damages last year. It is obviously apparent that it was the share sold to other countries that had been put off first.

From this time point, if it's like this, if there will crop failure this year too, what could come of it?

If it turns out like so, how would the North go out? Selling grains sparingly, on the contrary, will turn out to be not enough. Countries that cannot provide meals to themselves have no choice but to steal from elsewhere.

If it turns out like so, Sha'ou is the closest. If that country falls, it would become a foothold to other countries that communicate to it.

In the worst case, a war will break out.

(No, no, wait a sec.)

Was it really a country that would think so rashly?

But, in this society, it would require the conditions to request common sense from the other party. Common sense exists from the situation where the other party possesses the same values as you and has the flexibility to a certain extent.

Maomao flapped her limbs on the bed, and stopped.

(Alright.)

Speaking of that, what would come out of Maomao thinking of something like this?

This kind of matter is better left to the big shots. Even if they get overworked, this is the work for the people who eat much nicer meals. What this means is that there's no point for her to just think about it here.

However, it would be meaningless if those big shots are incompetent.

Maomao suddenly recalled the man called Uryuu.

Riishu's father. The man who considered his daughter as a political tool.

If he was the type of shallow person, who, believing that his daughter wasn't his child, had tried to get rid of her, he was in no way useful.

"..."

Maomao fixed her posture. She had been slouching. And then, moving sluggishly, she headed for the desk that furnished the room.

The ink in the glass bottle didn't need to be dissolved in water. There was a quill instead of a brush, and parchment, not paper made from plant material.

(What a waste.)

This is expensive, Maomao searched in the drawer. When she did so, there was wool paper inside, so she replaced the parchment with this. She wasn't used to the stationery, so the ink blotted and the characters became unsightly. *Afterwards, he would say all kinds of things, but it's fine if it's readable* – Maomao wrote down the things to be done.

And then she located a servant to discreetly pass the paper over to Rahan.

(Now then, will he get on board with it?)

How would Rahan move in such a time? He would get on board with it if he considers that he could properly make a connection with the other party, or he might say that he won't assist with such an unprofitable thing.

(Well, I'm fine with it either way though.)

Whether he's up for it or not, it was no loss or gain for Maomao. Rather, he might treat it as meddling.

However, normally, he would perfectly set the place for me for this kind of thing though,

she thought.
If it was Jinshi.

Well then, well then, what should I do when I return from this trip – a different issue came to Maomao's mind, but she decided to forget about it as well.

If it's something you don't know even if you agonise over it, it would be better to use that time for something else.

That was Maomao's personality.

Chapter 27

Father and Daughter

“What do you want to talk about?” Uryuu said with dissatisfaction towards the established seating.

The man was sitting on the long table with two of his subordinates. Rahan, Rikuson and Maomao sat across them.

It seems he wasn't pleased with the fact that he had been summoned by a younger man who had a lower status than him, and that Maomao was sitting with them for the meal. That's true, it was typical in this situation to be taken back when you have a woman here. Yesterday's banquet was more on the side of unusual.

The table was set up with dishes that had been ordered beforehand. They weren't that stingy to have yesterday's leftovers.

“Haha. Are you curious about this person?” Rahan said, looking at Maomao.

“No, I just thought it was odd. I didn't think Rahan-dono would engage in small talk.” Uryuu gave a tactful reply. As there wasn't small talk, it must be a reply based on his quick temper.

“This person is my younger sister,” Rahan said.

“Hoh, younger sister? This is the first time I've heard of it though?”

Uryuu's brow twitched in surprise. That's true. Rahan's adoptive father would be Rakan, his uncle. Everyone knew the story where Rakan chased out his father and half-brother to usurp the family headship.

Then, what would happen if he said that there is a younger sister here?

She was driven by the urge to stomp on Rahan's toes and even smear salve on him, but let's endure.

As a result, it seems Uryuu's interest was piqued.

“Indeed, even my adoptive father is a man after all. She is a daughter from a courtesan,” Rahan answered.

He wasn’t wrong. Maomao silently watched their reaction.

The ones who looked blatantly shocked were Uryuu’s subordinates. They ogled at Maomao like they were looking at something unusual.

“Though she entered the inner palace once, her looks are as you see. She was sent home just like that,” Rahan added.

He wasn’t wrong about that either. Though, it was somewhat irritating.

“No, but even if she’s Rakan’s daughter, isn’t it stranger to cherish her since she’s illegitimate?” Uryuu asked.

Mhm, she won’t deny it about her appearance, but his words were reasonable. That old man didn’t send her into the inner palace, but he probably didn’t need to explain that part. It was a little special and complicated.

“Haha. My dad is one of those types who won’t give his daughter away to those he doesn’t have a good eye for. He’ll start boasting about it sooner or later too,” Rahan said.

She thought that there was nothing that shouldn’t be said, but it’s one of those things that sound more radical if you try to talk about it.

Then, just as Rahan piqued their interest, he advanced the talks.

“Incidentally, shall we move onto the main topic?” he said.

Rahan took out a sheet of parchment from his breast pocket and showed it to Uryuu.

Uryuu’s brows twitched in surprise. “What is this?”

“Yes, this is about the business discussion that will start now.” Rahan smiled, his glasses glinting. She heard that Uryuu was someone who had a good business sense from the start. It wasn’t a bad means to broach the topic by garnering his interest

about Maomao first to get to the main topic. At least, with Rahan's position...

(This bastard.)

It will be a pain if the story about whose daughter Maomao is gets leaked, but it probably wouldn't matter for this guy. Rather, he must have thought that he could use it as a bargaining chip.

However, Maomao was the one who had asked Rahan. She couldn't raise a fuss about it here.

(Let's think about it later.)

They were currently doing something else.

Rahan started the new business talks with pleasure. It looks like the intelligence he obtained from the woman called Irene was practical enough.

If that woman's story is true, Sha'ou might join up with Hoku'aren^(North Aren) hereafter. Even if that isn't the case, the possibility of their suffering from food shortages is high.

If it is the former, there will be a spike in pre-war special procurement demands. If all the needed items are bought up, the prices will shoot up.

If it is the latter, there will be an increase in new exported goods. Sha'ou could buy grains from here in place of the North if they take it there. It seems it is unprofitable by nature to transport food with the current geographical conditions due to time constraints. Nonetheless, if that country buys it at higher prices, there was also the means to transport the excess rice and wheat by ship.

(That's if our country has food supply left over.)

If there are locust damages here too, they probably won't ship it out. Still, it might be possible as a means of diplomacy though.

Maomao didn't know about that part.

She only knew that Rahan was making a very evil expression. Maomao had requested him to do this, but it seems he had no intentions of not making good use of his duty.

Though they were dining together, everyone was ignoring the food. It will be waste for

it to get cold. *Is it okay if I eat?* Maomao glanced around, just as a plate of food was gently placed before her. Rikuson had prepared it for her, his face genial.

Mhm, his diligence that was completely unlike his appearance reminded her of Gaoshun. Is that uncle healthy? Even if he wasn't accompanying Jinshi, he must be having difficulties.

From Maomao's perspective, Uryuu looked like he was nothing more than an intolerant man, and yet when she saw him conversing with Rahan, she thought that he must really have good business sense. He was just discussing while considering if there was profit even if he was probing and not taking his conversational partner's words at face value. Although, it wasn't a conversation he could go in depth with Maomao and Rikuson in proximity.

Has his mood been placated a little? Maomao checked Uryuu who had a good complexion and discreetly poked Rahan under the table.

Rahan glanced at Maomao, then looked at Uryuu as if nothing happened.

"The dishes have also gone a little cold. Let's prepare something fresh." Rikuson smoothly inserted himself into the discussion. When he did so, a server came in carrying food as if she had been waiting.

However, the servers looked a little gloomy. Maomao knew the reason for that very well.

They laid out the steaming fish dish. Seeing that, Uryuu's mood soured. As if they read his expression, the servers gave a start.

It was only the other day when the server who had recommended the fish dish to Uryuu was punished. And yet, everything they brought out was fish. Of course, their expressions would change.

Of course, it had been Maomao who had directed them to do so.

"For the inland, the fish here is delicious," Rahan said.

Rahan was into the fish dish so he must be okay with it, but Uryuu's complexion looked horrible. Position-wise, he could just decline the food. It seems like he was only hesitant about speaking about the reason for it.

At the point, Maomao finally opened her mouth. “Was it last year? Do you remember the poisoning incident at the garden party?”

Uryuu’s brow twitched in surprise at Maomao’s talking, but that was all. “Ahh. The incident where Empress Gyokuyou was targeted.”

That must be how it is officially. However, does Uryuu know who was the actual target? Or does he not?

Doesn’t matter. Maomao was only talking about that time anyways.

“That time, Consort Riishu’s entire body broke out in hives,” she said.

“...is that so?”

How is that related – that was what he sounded like.

“It seems there was a dish brought out at the garden party that she couldn’t eat. What was it again? Oh, that’s right, it was a fish namasu.”

“...” Uryuu’s look changed.

He stared at Maomao.

“I was also in the inner palace during that incident. I happened to be at the place,” she told him.

Consort Riishu was cowardly from a long time ago. Still, she tried her best to bluff. That must be why she ate the namasu while knowing perfectly well that she couldn’t eat it.

Namasu is a dish made with raw fish and meat. However, there could be poison lurking in raw ingredients. In the case of blueback fish, there could be parasites, so it is not suited to eat when it has gone off. You’ll get poisoned if you eat that.

However, it was an imperial dish, and moreover, for the emperor to eat. There would be no way people will bring out something that has gone off. Besides, if there was poison, the other consorts and food tasters should also get hit too. Since nothing happened, Maomao thought that was due to Consort Riishu’s constitution.

And Maomao knew that it was common for this predisposition to be passed on from parents.

“It didn’t seem like there were any good maids around Consort Riishu. Even if there was something she couldn’t eat, they treated her as a picky eater. Even though her skin that had broken out in rashes won’t pass by the emperor’s eyes,” she said.

There was no way the man, who was good at business, was dumb to not know what she had been talking about up until now. Still, Maomao continued to push forward.

“By the way, the dishes in the garden party were all his majesty’s favourites,” she added.

He was an old man who was surprisingly health conscious. That might be connected to his vigour at night.

Maomao alternated her gaze between the fish dish and Uryuu.

“It seems like you don’t like fish dishes at all. Shall we prepare something else for you instead?” Maomao said, her tone courteous, as she gave a look solely for Rahan that ordered him to “Quickly prepare it.”

Rikuson was helpful as always – he went to talk to the server who was standing outside the room. He was truly attentive, all because he is the subordinate of the weirdo tactician.

Maomao looked at the fish dish nonchalantly. When she glanced at the dish, wondering if it was okay for her to start eating, Uryuu stared at Maomao.

Wait a bit, Rahan looked at her.

Maomao decided to wait for a little while until a different meat dish was carried over.

Afterwards, the dining continued on for another dual-hour, but Uryuu was silent. He looked like he was thinking of something, yet looking like he held some conviction.

However, his reaction was different to how Maomao had imagined it.

(Didn't he try to get his daughter assaulted by robbers?)

In reality, Consort Riishu had been assaulted in town.

Could he be regretting that, and is now in a peace of mind?
Or could he be...

(He's too shallow.)

It wasn't wise to get gript by his emotions and assault Consort Riishu. He would have done it earlier if he were to do it.

"Excuse me though..." As Maomao was groaning as she was about to return to her room, Uryuu called out to her.

"I've seen you before from somewhere. Could you be, the food taster, from that time?" he asked.

"..." Maomao gave an ambiguous smile and slowly lowered her head. "Why would I be food tasting?"

"No, it seems I was just imagining things," Uryuu said.

Maomao had explained it away barefacedly. He withdrew. She held her smile with all her might to stop it from quivering.

(Does he remember?)

Not good – her body suddenly broke out in tepid sweat.

Most of the big shot would have been at that garden party. Excluding the quirky weirdo who had skipped out.

She was relieved that she changed her makeup. It had been last year. She didn't think

he would have remembered. Even though practically no one paid attention during the banquet.

Of course, it would be troubling if she got exposed as the maid who food tasted while smiling.



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